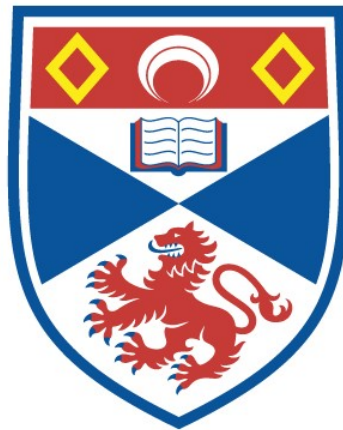


# THE WAR OF IDENTITIES AMIDST THE SYRIAN UPRISING: THE CONTINUAL REPRODUCTION OF SUB-STATE IDENTITIES AND THE QUEST TO RECONSTRUCT SYRIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

Ola Abdulsater Rifai

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of MPhil  
at the  
University of St Andrews



2014

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**The War of Identities amidst the Syrian Uprising; the continual reproduction of sub-state Identities and the quest to reconstruct Syrian national identity**

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Thesis Submitted for MPhil degree at the University of St-Andrews

June 2014

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I Ola Rifai hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 39189 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree. I was admitted as a research student in September 2012 and as a candidate for the degree of MPhil in July 2013 the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2012 and 2013.

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### **Acknowledgment**

It was only during the writing phases of this thesis that I came to realise how hard and painful it is to produce an academic account concerning events that are taking place in one's own country, particularly when these events are causing the deaths of one's people, friends and relatives. I came to recognise how difficult it is to study the factors that have set one's country ablaze. The escalation of violence in Syria increased rapidly during the writing of this thesis, which made it extremely hard to produce. However, the sincere support that I have received from various individuals helped me to persevere, and to maintain my belief in the significance of academic research in rebuilding Syria.

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to the Asfari Foundation, which generously funded my studies at the University of St-Andrews. Without this funding, it would not have been possible to carry out the research necessary to gaining this degree. Also, I'm deeply grateful to my supervisor, Professor Raymond Hinnebusch, who always provided me with inspiring feedback, and who was constantly willing to engage in fruitful debates and to read my endless drafts. Without his invaluable supervision and guidance, this thesis would not have seen the light of day. Accordingly, I would like to express my especial thanks for everything he did for me. I would also like to thank my second supervisor, Dr. Fiona McCallum, for commenting on my long drafts so patiently.

I'm very grateful to all the individuals who, regardless of the violence and hardship that they were subjected to, agreed to be interviewed by me either in person or via the Internet. Without their participation, this thesis would most certainly have remained incomplete. Also, I wish to express my thanks and appreciation to my parents, Abdulsater and Muhannad Rifai, and my brother, Luay

Rifai, who very generously supported me throughout the writing of this thesis. All three of them were always there to instill morale, and to keep my spirits up. Last, but by no means least, I'm grateful to my good friends in St-Andrews, Nasrin Akhter, Jinan al-Habbal and Haian Dukhan, who with their love and support made the Scottish bubble a warmer and more enjoyable place.

### **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to those Syrians who lost their lives as a result of having been trapped in the identity box. Also to those Syrians who lost their lives attempting to escape from the identity box, and to those Syrians who are still captive in the identity box.

I dedicate this thesis to Syria, and to all Syrians.

## Contributions

Some materials in this thesis are published in the following:

Rifai, Ola “The Role of Media in the Syrian Conflict: Reviewing the paradox” *Wiley-Blackwell journal Asian Politics & Policy* (forthcoming July 2014).

“Education and Flags: pivotal tools for winning the hearts and the minds of Syria’s new generation”, Centre for Syrian Studies Website, available at <http://css.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/files/2014/02/Education1.pdf> . Accessed on 22/3/2014

“Education and Flags: seminal for winning the hearts and the minds of Syria’s new generation”, opendemocracy, available at <http://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/ola-rifai/education-and-flags-seminal-for-winning-hearts-and-minds-of-syria%E2%80%99s-new-gen>. accessed on 29/5/2014

“The identity balance during the Syrian uprising: a vehement reconstruction?”, Centre for Syria Studies Website, available at <http://css.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/files/2014/01/Identity1.pdf> . Accessed on 10/3/2014. And also published in Opendedomcracy, available at <http://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/ola-rifai/shifting-balance-of-identity-politics-after-syrian-uprising>. Accessed on 29/5/2014.

### **Abstract**

This thesis is about identity clashes during the first two years of the Syrian uprising (from 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2011 to 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2013). Chiefly, it attempts to answer the following questions: what roles do identities play in the construction of power among the various identity groups? What were the reasons for the identity clashes that occurred during the Syrian uprising?. How can we evaluate the reproduction of identity during the uprising?. The Alawite, Sunni, Kurdish and Syrian national identities are used to illustrate how in the course of the uprising, these identities were consistently being reproduced as each group vied for power. This thesis argues that during the Syrian uprising these identities were subject to an enduring process of reproduction and reinforcement by discourse directed from above and from below, in which symbolic and materialistic elements played a vital role. The mode of analysis for this thesis is framed by the modernist and symbolist approaches to theories of nationalism and is underpinned by the theory of communal violence.

## **Chapter One: Scope of the Study**

The following account provides an overview of the content and the methodology of the thesis. It consists of five sections. Subsequent to the introduction, the first section outlines the research questions and justifies the selection of the case studies. The second section surveys the theoretical literature and discusses the theoretical model for the thesis. The third section delineates the main argument of the thesis in accordance with its hypotheses. The fourth section discusses the methodological approach, research sources, limitations of the research, and the definition of terms. The fifth section provides an outline of the structure of the thesis.

### **Introduction**

For forty-two years, questions surrounding identity and sectarianism in Syria had been excluded from the public debate. Unlike their neighbors in Lebanon and Iraq, Syrians appeared to be extremely united and visitors to Syria received the impression that Syrian people had a solid

national identity. When asked about his or her sectarian identity, a Syrian would typically give the instant reply, *al-dyn li Allah w al-watan li al-jamy'*, meaning that religion is for God and the country is for all. For Syrians, discussing sectarian identities was *'aib* a shame as it was their belief that *kuluna souryoun* we are all Syrians. They seemed to have a sense of pride in their national identity and were prioritising it over sectarian affiliations. In this context, a Syrian Alawite man filmed the first protest against the Syrian president Bashar Assad's rule in the heart of Damascus on March 2011. Whilst filming protesters chanting freedom slogans, this Alawite man seemed to be extremely confident about the extent to which Syrians were united in their national identity, stressing that "all factions of the Syrian people are united [...] Sunnis and Alawites will cooperate together to overthrow this regime".<sup>1</sup> Realistically, his words proved to be highly idealistic in comparison to what happened on the ground. Although the Syrian uprising had its roots in a peaceful movement that strove for social justice it nevertheless morphed into an armed power struggle between various groups, in which sectarian identities were instrumentalised. At the time of writing, a fight for hegemony between the Sunni, Alawite, Kurdish and Syrian national identities is taking place. What went wrong? Why did Syrians, who once seemed to possess a cohesive unity, become fragmented in a civil war? What accounts for this fight and how we can evaluate it? This thesis attempts to answer these questions.

However, it must be emphasised that the aim of this thesis is not to simplify the uprising of the Syrian people by characterising it as a war of identities. Rather, it defines this war of identities as being one of the core dimensions of the uprising.

### **1.1 Questions and objectives of the research:**

The ultimate object of this thesis is to address the causes of the identity clashes during the Syrian uprising and to evaluate the reproduction of identities during its first two years (March 2011 to March 2013). To this end, the thesis evaluates endeavors of state and non-state political

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<sup>1</sup>Author's interview with anonymous Alawite via Skype 15/3/2011. Also, the video of this protest is available online and sources who were presented at the protest assured the author of the accuracy of this material. See "al-thawra al-souriyya" (the Syrian revolution), YouTube, accessed on 25/2/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rthdT-PiAck>.

entrepreneurs to construct identities and assesses their roles in reproducing Sunni, Alawite, Kurdish and Syrian national identities. ‘Syrian national identity’ represents the identification with the Syrian state (*al hawiyya al-wataniyya*) as opposed to sectarian identity (*al-hawiyya al-ta’ifiyya*). The Arabic word *ta’ifiyya* stems from *tai’fa* which refers to sect, group, clan, class, and ethnicity. Hence it is a reliable signifier of group identity.<sup>2</sup> This thesis also examines the role of materialistic elements (e.g. arms and media), and symbolic features (e.g. flag, folklore and language) in reproducing identities and reinforcing the strength of a given identity over the others. As stated above, the primary aim of this thesis is to account for identity clashes during the Syrian uprising. However answering this question requires an examination of the following questions:

- 1) What role does identity play in establishing power among the various groups?
- 2) How can we assess the reproduction of identities during the uprising?
- 3) What are the roles that state and non-state political entrepreneurs play in shaping identities?
- 4) How can we evaluate the impact of the material structure and the symbolic elements on identities?
- 5) What are the implications of communal violence on identity clashes?

## 1.2 Case selection:

This thesis opted for Sunnis, Alawites and Kurds as the categories that best represent key identities in Syria. The Alawites constitute a religious minority group that has been in power for approximately four decades, and is the largest religious minority in Syria. During the uprising, the Alawites engaged in a vicious conflict with Sunnis. The Sunnis constitute a religious majority group who had a historical record of clashes with the Alawites in late 1970s and early 1980s and

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<sup>2</sup> Anh Nga Longva and Anne Sofie Roald *Religious Minorities in the Middle East: Domination, Self-Empowerment, Accommodation*, (Netherlands: Brill, 2011),p.8.



who strove to control the Alawites during the Syrian uprising. The Kurds constitute the largest ethnic minority group in Syria who, prior to the uprising, were largely oppressed by Syrian authorities. During the uprising, they established a quasi-autonomy in which identity clashes took place. Additionally, this thesis examines the Syrian national identity as a mean of illustrating how amid the identity clashes, this identity was being continually reproduced while it strove for empowerment. Each of these cases would play a substantial role in shaping the post-Assad Syria.

## **2.1. Theoretical literature and paradigms towards analysing identity clashes:**

The use of a single theoretical approach to the study of identity clashes would limit the scope of the thesis by only revealing one part of the greater picture. Thus, this thesis attempts to encapsulate various theories in an analytical model that serves as a tool with which to answer the research questions. This model is not inherently biased toward any existing theory, which makes it ideally suited to addressing the lacunas in some theories concerning the question of identity. The following section provides a theoretical literature review, which both specifies these theories and justifies the reasons for deploying them. In addition, it illustrates how these theories function together when are combined.

### **2.1.1 – Theories of Identity, Nationalism and Constructivism:**

#### **Conceptualising identity:**

*What about identity? I asked.*

*He said: It is self-defense.*

*Identity is the child of birth, but in the end of the day, it is self-invention.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mahmoud Darwysh *ka zahri al-lawz aw ab'ad*, (like the almond blossom or farther) (Beirut: Dar al-Raiyys, 2008), p.183.

The Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (d. 2008)

Identity is an extremely paradoxical concept that is not subject to a fixed definition. It may be a source of stability and of instability, of violence or of tolerance, it may be a motivation for unity and for division. *Idem* is the Latin root of the word identity, and it translates to English as “the same”.<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that identity is an elusive concept that is not subject to a particular definition, it can be argued that, its core meaning lies in how it denotes the actor’s relationship to the other, since it is “shaped and modified by interaction between the individual and the surrounding social milieu”.<sup>5</sup> Telhami and Barnett (2002) note that identities are not “only personal or psychological, but are also social and are profoundly influenced by the actor’s interaction with and relationship to the other”.<sup>6</sup> In light of this, theorists of the two main schools of identity studies, (the social identity and the identity theory), agree that identity is based on how an individual is differs in his or her relationship with the other.<sup>7</sup> Bernard Lewis (1998) argues that identity “is the line that divides self from other, insiders from outsiders, a clear division between ‘us’ and ‘them’”.<sup>8</sup> In parallel to this, Johan R. Campbell and Alan Rew (1999) stress that “identity concerns what you consider yourself to belong to both at the level of ideas and explanation but also in terms of emotional experience and the expression of affect”.<sup>9</sup> They went on to argue that all types of identities are based on perspectives of otherness and that “all social identities racial, ethnic, gendered, sexual, religious and national- find their definition in relation to significant others just

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<sup>4</sup> Gleason, Philip “Identifying identity; a semantic history”, *Journal of American History*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (March 1983), pp.910-031, p.911.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid,p.918. For detailed account on definitions of identity see Charles Lemert “A history of Identity; the riddle at the heart of the mystery of life”, in Anthony Elliott *Routledge Handbook of Identity studies*, (London: Routledge, 2011) pp.3-29 .

<sup>6</sup>Shibley Telhami and Michel Barnett *Identity and foreign policy in the Middle East*, (London: Cronell University Press, 2002), p.8

<sup>7</sup> Social identity theory, which is applied to this thesis, emphasises category-based identity and identity theory focuses on role-based identity. See Jan, Stets and Burke, Peter “Identity theory and social identity theory” *social psychology Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 3, 2000 pp. 224-237,p.224. For an analytical discussion on identity theory and identity social theory see Stryker, Sheldon and Burke Peter “The Past, and Future of Identity Theory” *social psychology Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (Dec. 2000),pp.284-297

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Lewis *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1998),p.111

<sup>9</sup>John Campbell and Alan Rew *Identity and affect; experiences of identity in a globalising world*, (London: Pluto Press,1999),p.8.

as they articulate ideas of selfhood which are communicated and giving meaning through social interaction”.<sup>10</sup>

But what is an identity composed of? Identity entails a group of affiliations that an individual has with a place, state, religion, tribe or a clan. It cannot be limited to one given affiliation. Rather, it is composed of myriad affiliations which can be considered as layers of identity. None of these layers are capable of completely eroding or effacing the others, however, one given layer may prevail over the others.<sup>11</sup> Although these layers “can be integrated in a relatively harmonious way”<sup>12</sup> and can function together peacefully, they nevertheless may contradict each other and consequently provoke identity clashes.<sup>13</sup> Thus, identities are not stable, but are subject to radical change. Indeed, there is a myriad of environmental factors that are capable of disturbing the balance of identity and inciting clashes. Ostensibly, the most significant factor is the politicisation of identity by state or non-state political entrepreneurs who manipulate identities for their own ends. In this light, Caroline Brettell (2003) argues that political entrepreneurs “work for the profit gained by identifying themselves with ethnic pride or ethnic issue”.<sup>14</sup> Various elements accelerate this process of politicisation, such as socio-economic factors and the symbolic features that are most likely to turn the identity into a primary source of instability and violence. In short as the prominent Lebanese author Amin Ma’llof puts it, the politicisation of identity can transform identity into *wahish* a monster.<sup>15</sup>

### **Paradigms of Nationalism, Identity and Ethnicity;**

In essence, the central debate among theorists of nationalism, identity and ethnicity concerns the role of the past in shaping these three concepts. The role of the past has divided theorists and prompted them to follow different approaches. The dominant debate exists between the

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid.p.13.

<sup>11</sup>David Miller *On Nationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.120-121.

<sup>12</sup>Telhami and Barnett, *op.cit.*, p.15

<sup>13</sup>Stryker,*op.cit.*, p.290.

<sup>14</sup> Caroline Brettell, *Anthropology and Migration: Essays on Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and Identity*, (Lanham: Alta Mira Press, 2003),p.127

<sup>15</sup>Amin Ma’llof *al-hawiyyat al-katela*, (The Killing Identities),( Syria; Dal al Hassad, 1999),p.10. Also see Amartya Sen *al-hawyyia w al-'unf; wahem al-qadar* (Identity and violence; the illusion of destiny), ( Lebanon: Jaddawel, 2006), p.35.

primordialists and the modernists, instrumentalists and constructivists. Primordialism assumes that identity is ancient, hereditary and fixed from birth, as it is grounded on ‘primordial’ attachments to a particular group or culture. For primordialists individuals are born into an identity rather than consciously or voluntarily adhering to one.<sup>16</sup> Modernists stress that nationalism is a product of modernity, and that it “came into being with the transition to industrialism”.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, instrumentalists consider identities, nationalism and ethnicity as mere tools of the state or non-state political entrepreneurs who seek to achieve their own materialistic objectives.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the constructivist approach assumes that nationalism, ethnicity and identities are open to manipulation by political leaders while admitting that identities stem from historical roots. In short, constructivists claim that identity has its roots in the past but that this past is nevertheless subject to human actions and the manipulation of political entrepreneurs in their struggle for power. However, constructivists also assert that identities cannot be manipulated to the point at which new or artificial identities are easily invented.<sup>19</sup>

Seen in this vein, Ernest Gellner argues that nationalism is a product of modernity and that, before the advent of modernity, it did not exist. He asserts that it was only under the impact of a “certain kind of socio-economic form, best described as ‘industrialism’ [...] nation emerged and become politically significant and often engendered changes in boundaries”.<sup>20</sup> For modernists like Gellner it was only the modern era that provided the material sources to create nationalism (e.g. transportation and educational system and print). In this light, the age of globalisation and technology revolution provided the state or non-state actors with new materials for reconstructing identity, such as Satellite TV stations, digital media, internet and social networks. All of these materials are now considered to be major tools in the “struggle over the construction of social and political reality”.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the rapid and wide diffusion of digital media and internet based social media is no longer limited to developed countries, and these tools are being widely used by

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<sup>16</sup> Umut Ozkirmli *Theories of Nationalism; A critical introduction*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.49.

<sup>17</sup> Ernest Gellner *Nations and nationalism*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006) xxiii

<sup>18</sup> Calhoun *op.cit.*, p. 30. For a comprehensive account on instrumentalist approach see Paul Brass “Elite groups, symbol manipulation and ethnic identity and the Muslim of South Asia”, in David Taylor and Malcolm Yapp *Political Identity in South Asia*, (London; Curzon Press, 1979), pp.85-105

<sup>19</sup> Calhoun *op.cit.*, p.30.

<sup>20</sup> Ernest Gellner *Encounters Nationalism*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publisher Ltd, 1994), p.199.

<sup>21</sup> “Image politics in the Middle East”, LSE Website, accessed on 2/3/2013, available at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2012/12/07/image-politics-in-the-middle-east/>.

people in the third world. Consequently, this has eroded the states' monopoly on media.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, during the last decade a vast amount of literature has emerged that focuses on the impact of new media on political and socio-economic spheres in the Arab World. Most scholars admit that the internet is an extremely powerful tool which is "embedded in actual societal structures and power dynamics: its topography weaves in and out of non-electronic space".<sup>23</sup> In fact, scholars argue that the new media implements are capable of empowering trans-state identities while weakening state identity.<sup>24</sup> As this thesis illustrates, satellite TV stations and internet based social media like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have a powerful impact on the formation, reconstruction and reinforcement of identity. During the Syrian uprising these uncontrolled materials were employed by political entrepreneurs to advance a particular form of manufactured identity.

### **Symbols and myths vis-à-vis sub-state identities:**

The modernist logic places a heavy emphasis on the role of materialistic elements like economy and mass media at the cost of neglecting the role of symbols in constructing identities. In light of this neglect, Anthony Smith, a former student of Gellner attempts to address the gaps in modernist theory by arguing that nationalism and identity draw on the history, symbols and culture of a particular group. Smith developed the 'ethno-symbolist' approach to the study of nationalism, in which he looks at identities in terms of their "constituent symbolic resources, that is, memories, values, myths".<sup>25</sup> In this vein Murray Edelman defines myth as the "belief held in common by a large group of people that gives events and actions a particular meaning".<sup>26</sup> According to Stuart Kaufman, a symbol is an "emotionally charged shorthand reference to a myth".<sup>27</sup> Ethno-

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<sup>22</sup>For a discussion of the media's role during the Syrian uprising see Adam Almqvist "The Syrian Uprising and the transnational Public Sphere: New Media, Politics of Representation, and the Consolidation and Fragmentation of Publics"; (paper submitted to Center for Middle Eastern Studies: Lund University, 2013)

<sup>23</sup>Sadkia Sassen, "Digital networks and power" in Mike Featherstone & Scott Lash (eds.) *Spaces of Culture; City, Nation, World* (London:Sage,1999), pp. 49-63. p.62

<sup>24</sup> For a further elaboration on the impact of media on civil society in Syria see Shaery-Eisenlohra, Roschanack "From Subject to Citizen? Civil Society and the Internet in Syria", *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 20, Issue. 2,(2011) pp. 127-138.

<sup>25</sup> Anthony Smith *ethno-symbolism and nationalism; A cultural approach*, (London: Routledge, 2009), p.15-16

<sup>26</sup>Murray Edelman *Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence*, (New York: Academic Press, 1971), p. 14.

<sup>27</sup>Stuart Kaufman *Modern hatreds: the symbolic politics of ethnic war*, (London: Cronell University Press, 2001), p. 16.

symbolism mainly highlights the significance of symbols in forming identities and motivating communal actions, while modernism stresses the importance of the roles of material structures and the elite in the formation of nationalism and identity. Although Smith does not devalue these material factors, it is his belief that symbolism plays the most significant role in creating identities. In other words, Smith believes that symbols of mutual memories, myths, and values among members of a community establish cohesion. He asserts that the process of selecting symbols that represent the whole community and distinguish it from the 'other' is vital to the production and reproduction of identities.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Stuart Kaufman (2001) propounds the 'symbolic politics theory' of ethnic war, in which he stresses that symbols are the primary causes of ethnic wars. According to this theory "the core of ethnic identity is the 'myth-symbol complex' the combination of myths, memories, values, and symbols serves not only to determine who is a member of the group, but also to define what it means to be a member".<sup>29</sup> Kaufman maintains that "it is the existence, status, and security of the group symbols, which is why people are willing to fight and die for them-and why they are willing to follow leaders who manipulate those symbols for dubious or selfish purpose".<sup>30</sup> In *Modern hatreds: the symbolic politics of ethnic war*, Kaufman applies his theory to four cases in post-communist Europe in order to assess the role of symbols in provoking violence. He argues that members of the elite instrumentalise symbols of particular myths as a means of mobilising ethnic groups. In his words, ethnic symbols are "tools used by manipulative elites, but they only work when there is some real or perceived conflict of interest at work and mythically based feelings of hostility that can be tapped using ethnic symbols".<sup>31</sup> Mainly, he refutes the idea that 'ancient hatreds' are a chief source of ethnic violence, arguing that although hatred is 'real' and is an essential cause of ethnic conflict, it is not ancient. Rather, it is "renewed in each generation by mythologies that are typically modern revisions of older stories with quiet different messages".<sup>32</sup> This thesis applies Kaufman's theory to its assessment of the roles of

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<sup>28</sup> Anthony Smith 2009, *op.cit.*

<sup>29</sup> Stuart Kaufman 2001, *op.cit.*, p.25.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*

<sup>31</sup> Stuart Kaufman, *op. cit.*, p.12. Also see Kaufman, Stuart "Narratives and Symbols in Violent Mobilization: The Palestinian-Israeli Case", *Security Studies* 18, no.3 (September 2009), pp.400-434.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p.11.

symbols and myths in reproducing identities and its evaluation of their roles in provoking identity clashes during the Syrian uprising. Although Kaufman's contribution to the study of ethnic conflicts is distinguished and his approach is robust, he limits his focus to the elites' roles in utilising symbols as hegemonic tools. In doing so, he downplays the role of the masses in reinforcing these symbols from below. Hence, this thesis attempts to bridge the gap in his theory by analysing the role of symbols in reproducing identities both at the grassroots level (bottom-up) and the elite level (top-down).

Despite being the products of two very different schools of thought nevertheless, symbolist and modernist theories can function as analytical lenses through which one view the puzzle of identity. This thesis argues that materialistic and symbolic features are interdependent in their capacity to provoke identity clashes, both are used to equal effect in asserting the superiority of an identity against the 'other'.

### **The Constructivist approach:**

Constructivist logic characterises identities as *fluid* variables, and stresses that they are changeable according to their structure and to the manipulations of various actors. In other words, the constructivist approach assumes that identities are like paste, easily molded into different shapes by political entrepreneurs and influenced by myriad of factors. Moreover, constructivist theories assert that identity has the crucial ability to reshape social and political structure.<sup>33</sup> This thesis favours a constructivist approach in assessing how identities were reconstructed during the uprising, and the extent to which the outbreak of identity clashes was caused by the alignment of internal factors. The policies of the Syrian regime and the sectarian discourse by a number of Sunni political entrepreneurs are two notable examples of these factors. The influence of external factors, such as rhetoric employed by outsider actors in relation to the uprising, is also considered here. The constructivist approach also accounts for how particular identities are reproduced and reinforced via symbolic elements. Most importantly, it focuses on the interaction between the various discourses, which occurs between material and ideational on one hand, and between

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<sup>33</sup>Ted Robert Gurr and Barbara Harff, *B Ethnic conflict in world politics*, (USA; Westview Press, 2004), p.97, and Suny, Grigor "Provisional Stabilities: The Politics of Identities in Post-Soviet Eurasia", *International Security* Vol. 24, No. 3, (1999-2000), pp.139-144.

individual actors or groups on the other hand. In fact, the analysis of this kind of interaction is extremely important, as it either creates enmity or produces amity. By contrast, the ethno-symbolism approach focuses mainly on the roles of symbols while ignoring the implications of these roles when they begin to interact with the surrounding actors and factors. In this respect, conducting a constructivist approach is more successful in bridging the gaps between theories of nationalism and ethnicity. In short, this thesis employs constructivist logic to evaluate the vertical and the horizontal reconstruction of Sunni, Alawite, Kurdish identities and the Syrian national identity, and the creation of identity clashes from above and from below. Most importantly, this thesis uses constructivism as a lens through which to examine the interaction between discourses directed from above and from below, and how this interaction produces the required circumstances for the outbreak of identity clashes.

### **2.1.2. *Security dilemma* and the fall of the state:**

This thesis adhere to Stathis Kalyvas's definition of the term 'security dilemma', which is that *security dilemma* "occur when a breakdown of order creates a situation in which individuals coordinating around focal points, ethnic identities, resort to preemptive violence [...] because of security fear".<sup>34</sup> Consequently, a *security dilemma* force ethnic groups into a self-help situation where no neutral government or a third party is able to guarantee the security of each group.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, each group becomes trapped in a cycle of mistrust,<sup>36</sup> in which each group attempts to prevail over the other and, despite the consequent activation of defensive and offensive strategies, no group reached a state of absolute security.

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<sup>34</sup> Stathis N Kalyvas *The logic of violence in civil war*, (USA: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.61

<sup>35</sup> Kaufman, Stuart "Spiraling to Ethnic War: Elites, Masses, and Moscow in Moldova's Civil War", *International Security*, 21(2),(1996) pp108-138.

<sup>36</sup> Fearon, D . "Commitment Problems and the Spread of Ethnic Conflict" in Lake I.D.A. and Rothschild, D. *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 108.



This definition of *security dilemma* provides a potential explanation for the identity clashes in Syria. During the uprising each identity group feared that the others might have dominated and hence each group strove to attain hegemony. Moreover, the *security dilemma* is easily escalated by chaos, violence and war propaganda which ferments the process of identity conflict.

Overall, none of the foregoing theoretical approaches is solely capable of explaining identity clashes in Syria. For this reason, this thesis attempts to merge a combination of these theories into a theoretical model, which is discussed in the following section.

## **2. 2. A theoretical model towards the study of identity clashes:**

The model argues that during the Syrian uprising the Alawite, Sunni, Kurdish and Syrian national identities were subject to an enduring process of reproduction by discourse that was directed from above and from below. This process establishes the power of identity and provokes identity clashes. Four variables are central to this process: 1) – state or non-state political entrepreneurs, 2) - material structures, 3) – symbols and 4) – the presence of a *security dilemma*.

## **3. Main argument and hypotheses:**

The following list of hypotheses gives an indication of the circumstances required for an outbreak of identity clashes of the kind that occurred during the Syrian uprising:

- 1) State and non-state political entrepreneurs seek to reproduce an identity that establishes their hegemony and legitimacy, this instrumentalisation of identities consequently sparks identity clashes.

- 2) External state and non-state actors orchestrate identity clashes while seeking *realpolitik* gain. Hence, they play significant roles in reinforcing the superiority of a specific identity over the other while remaining outside the country.
- 3) Materialistic and symbolic elements combine to empower a specific identity in opposition to the other, whilst state and non-state political entrepreneurs utilise materialistic and symbolic elements to reinforce identity. At this point, symbols operating horizontally at the grassroots level help to fuel the conflict.
- 4) Discourse directed from above interacts with that directed from below, and catalyses the continuous reproduction of identities. The reaction produced by these reproduced identities is largely responsible for the outbreak of identity clashes.
- 5) The existence of a *security dilemma* among the various identity groups accelerates the outbreak of identity clashes.

This thesis argues that, as modernists indicate, materialistic structures deployed by state and non-state political entrepreneurs played a vital role in reproducing identities and inciting identity clashes during the Syrian uprising. Notable examples of these structures are the media, economy and arms, which deeply influenced the reconstruction of Alawite, Sunni, Kurdish and the Syrian national identity from above. On the other hand, symbolic features that are associated with a particular identity (such as flags and folklore), underscore the line between the outsider and the insider, fuelling the conflict between identities. Although, these symbols are manipulated by state and non-state political entrepreneurs using a top-down approach, symbolic features also operate horizontally at the public level by reproducing a particular identity and exacerbating the conflict between one identity and another. This thesis argues that policies directed from above interact with discourse directed from below, this making identity clashes possible. In addition, the *security dilemma* (in which each group feels insecure) escalates identity conflict and influences the reproduction of identities.

#### 4. 1. Methodological approach:

Based on the qualitative research method, this thesis employs a discourse analysis technique. The aim of qualitative research is to deliver a substantial argument based on a “cogent interpretation” of various relevant sources.<sup>37</sup> Surely, researching the question of identity during the Syrian uprising is an extremely complicated task, which requires a suitable research method that explores all of the factors surrounding it. Indeed, prior to the uprising, experts in Syria adopted different methodological approaches towards the study of identity. These approaches include the historical (Ma’oz 1972),<sup>38</sup> the anecdotal (Ghalioun 2012),<sup>39</sup> and the biographical (Seale 1988).<sup>40</sup> Additionally, distinguished scholars like Raymond Hinnebusch (2011),<sup>41</sup> and Nicolas Van Dam (2011),<sup>42</sup> applied a combined approach of discourse and content analysis. However, none of these valuable accounts placed their arguments within the nationalism and ethnicity debate. Nevertheless, inspired by the modernist approach, Christopher Phillips,<sup>43</sup> provides a notable volume as regards the daily reproduction of the Arab identity (as a supra-national identity) in Syria prior to the uprising. However, Phillips devalued the symbolic factors in reproducing identity and furthermore, neglected the ‘everyday’ reproduction of sub-state identities which challenged the ‘everyday reproduction of Arab identity’, and which eventually triggered identity clashes.

In parallel, one year after the uprising some volumes emerged that discussed the dimensions of the uprising, but which lacked any theoretical framework as most authors adopted journalistic or narrative approaches. For instance, the Irish journalist Stephen Starr (2012),<sup>44</sup> provides an insightful volume in which he examines the implications of the sectarian divisions during the uprising without framing his argument in a theoretical perspective. Likewise, in *The Syrian Rebellion*,<sup>45</sup> the Middle East expert Fouad Ajami uses a narrative approach to analyse the sectarian

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<sup>37</sup>Elliot Eisner *The Enlightened Eye, Qualitative Inquiry and the Enhancement of Educational Practice*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1998), p. 3.

<sup>38</sup>Ma’oz, Moshe “Attempts at Creating a Political Community in Modern Syria”, *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Autumn, 1972), pp. 389-404.

<sup>39</sup>Burhan Ghalioun *al-masa’ala al-ta’yfiyya w mushkilit al ’ka’lyat*, (sectarianism and the problem of minorities), (Beirut: Arab Center For Research & Policy Studies, 2012)

<sup>40</sup>Patrick Seal *Assad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (London: University of California Press, 1988)

<sup>41</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch *Syria: The Revolution From Above* (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>42</sup> Nicolas Van Dam *The Struggle for power in Syria, Politics and Society under the Asad and the Bat’th Party* (London: I.B. TAURIS, 2011)

<sup>43</sup> Christopher Phillips *Everyday Arabism: the daily reproduction of the Arab World*, (New York: Routledge, 2013)

<sup>44</sup> Steven Starr *Revolt in Syria: Eye-Witness To The Uprising*, (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2012)

<sup>45</sup> Fouad Ajami *The Syrian Rebellion*, (Stanford: Hoover institution, 2012)

affiliations. Although Ajami's volume is rich in terms of empirical work and background, it is limited to a narrative use of rhetoric and hence neglects to provide any theoretical grounding. On the other hand, Carsten Wieland (2012),<sup>46</sup> provides a detailed account in which he applies content and discourse analysis to evaluate the Syrian regime's 'lost chances', which would have hindered the explosion of sectarian conflict. However, Wieland's volume does not focus on identity clashes *per se*.

All of these methods have provided valuable contributions to the study of identities in Syria prior to and during the uprising. Specifically, however, this thesis applies discourse analysis method that is grounded in the nationalism and ethnicity debate and which is framed by constructivist theory. Discourse analysis is the main approach favoured by constructivists, as for them it is the interaction between discourses that creates a particular reality. Hence in order to study a specific reality one should analyse the discourse of all actors involved. Most importantly, one should study the interaction between these discourses and map the implications of such an interaction. Discourse analysis has been applied to various disciplines, such as anthropology, international relations, culture studies and psychology. Notably, this methodology is not limited to linguistic studies, but instead focuses mainly on the dialogue and relations between speech, language, interests, knowledge and actions amongst all actors in a given social context.<sup>47</sup> In relation to this thesis, a discourse analysis methodology appropriately addresses the research questions by engaging in an in depth of all actors involved. Furthermore, this methodology analyse the interaction between these actors, such as the policies, actions and rhetoric employed by state and non-state political entrepreneurs. Lastly, in its adoption of such methodology, this thesis aims to bridge the gaps left in the existing literature and to contribute to a deeper understanding of identity clashes.

#### 4.2. Thesis's sources and analytical tools:

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<sup>46</sup> Carsten Wieland *A Decade of Lost Chances; Repression and Revolution from Damascus spring to Arab spring*, (Seattle: Cune Press, 2012)

<sup>47</sup> Michale Stubbs *Discourse analysis: the sociolinguistic analysis of natural language*, (oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 1;3 . Also see Barbra Johnstane *Discourse analysis*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p.3. And Marianne W Jorgenson Louise Phillips *Discourse analysis: as theory and method* (London: SAGE Publication Ltd, 2002), p. 1. Also see Hardy, Cynthia "Scaling up and bearing down in Discourse Analysis: Questions Regarding Textual Agencies and their Context", *organization* (May 2004) Vol. 11(3) pp. 415-425.

This thesis relies upon some key research devices, such as interviews, field observation, the analysis of primary documents and news sources and a critical survey of existing literature. Together these sources provide the suitable materials with which to answer the research questions. The fieldwork was carried out by the author in Syria between February 2012 and October 2012. During this period, the author was working as a reporter for the Associated Press. Also, the author conducted fieldwork in Lebanon in December 2012 and January 2013. Additionally, online interviews (via Skype and via email) were conducted by the author between March 2011 and March 2013. The first name of some participants has been published according to their request while others have asked to be anonymous. Also, some other participants opted to be identified by pseudonym. The date and the place of all interviews have been published according to the participants' approval. The author has selected the interviewees with the aim of obtaining as representative a sample of each identity group as possible.

#### **4.3. Limitations of the thesis:**

The main limitations of this study are those of sources and scope. Firstly, the accuracy of the sources is hampered somewhat by the propaganda that concerns all actors involved in the Syrian uprising. It is extremely challenging to ascertain the accuracy of the online materials and information that relates each identity group, such as news of ethnic torture and mass killings. In effort to obviate this limitation, this thesis focuses mainly on the implications of such data on identity clashes regardless of their accuracy. As it was beyond the scope of this thesis to verify this data, the thesis assumes that such account have the same catalysing implications on identity clashes regardless of their verity. Secondly, the scope of this thesis is limited by the complexity of its subject matter. At the time of the writing, the situation was rapidly evolving, and for this reason the thesis utilises a fixed timeframe and specific cases that appropriately represent each identity group.

#### **4.4. Definition of Terms: 'secular' and 'Islamist':**

These are each controversial terms that have various interpretations in the literature and hence it is important to clarify how this terms are being defined here. In fact, this thesis traces the term

secular to the “French *laïcité*” model which limits religion to the private sphere,<sup>48</sup> and stresses that political authority “should not be in the business of imposing or advancing or privileging any particular religion”.<sup>49</sup> The term ‘Islamist’ is used to signify individuals or groups who identify themselves definitively with Islam. On the other hand, the term ‘fundamentalist’ indicates individuals or groups whose *sine qua non* is the reestablishment of Muslim ethos and the creation of an Islamic state.<sup>50</sup> The following chapters elaborate on the classification of these terms according to each case study.

## 5. Thesis’ structure:

Chapter two of this thesis provides a historical background to the question of identity in Syria and delivers an informative summary on the Syrian uprising. Chapter three examines the identity clashes between the Sunnis and the Alawites, in which it provides analyses of the roles of the Syrian regime, Syrian Sunni political entrepreneurs, external state and non-states actors and the role of symbols in sparking clashes between Alawites and Sunnis. Chapter four examines the reconstruction of the Kurdish identity from above by the policies of Syria’s regime, it also concerns the actions of Kurdish political actors and external state and non-state political entrepreneurs, in addition to examine the roles of symbolic features in reconstructing Kurdish identity at the grassroots level. Chapter five evaluates the attempts of anti-Assad political actors to craft a Syrian national identity, and studies the sense of Syrianism that emerge from below. The conclusion will summarise the findings of the thesis.

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<sup>48</sup> Line Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria: The rise and the fall of Ba’athist secularism*, (London: Routledge, 2011), p.15. For a discussion on the model of French *laïcité* see Cannell, Fenella “The Anthropology of Secularism”, *Annual Review of Anthropology* Vol. 39: 85-100 ( October 2010), and Casanova, José “The Secular and Secularisms”, *Social Research* Volume 76, Number 4 / Winter 2009, pp. 1049-1066

<sup>49</sup> Geoffrey Braham Levey and Tariq Modood *Secularism; Religion and multicultural citizenship*, (Cambridge: Cambridge United Press, 2009), p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid p. 6. For a critical account on the definition of Islamist and Fundamentalist see Olivier Roy, *The failure of Political Islam*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

## **Chapter Two:**

### **Identity dilemma in Syria: from authoritarianism to uprising<sup>51</sup>**

The identity clashes that exploded in the uprising seem to be rooted in Syria's modern history. Although Syria enjoyed relative sectarian stability during the Assads tenure, the uprising indicates that the problem of identity was buried away rather than addressed. In order to set the stage for a critical analysis of identity clashes during the uprising, the first section of this chapter provides the historical background to the Alawite, Sunni, Kurdish and Syrian national

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<sup>51</sup> Some material in this chapter was previously published in The Identity balance during the Syrian Uprising: A vehement reconstruction? Centre for Syrian Studies Website, available at <http://css.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/files/2014/01/Identity1.pdf>, accessed on March 3, 2014.

identities. The second section delivers an informative summary of the background to the Syrian uprising.

***The identity puzzle in Syria (1946-2011):***

Historically, Syria is composed of various identity groups since its geostrategic position in the Levant set it as the cross-road for the movement of goods and people and also as a crucible of religions. For some four hundred years (1516-1916), Syria was part of the Ottoman Empire, however, the post-World War I settlement divided the Empire's heritage between France and Britain. As a result, present-day Syria comprising different identity groups, was granted to the French mandate.<sup>52</sup> Subsequently, the problematic questions of 'Who are we? Are we Syrians; Arabs; Kurds; Sunnis; Alawites, etc.?' Have been left unsolved. Having been created by outsiders this newly invented state, with artificial boundaries imposed on a mosaic society of multiple ethnic and sectarian groups, did not create a solid national identity. Certainly, the legacy of the mandate played an essential role in enhancing communal identities. The French applied divide-and-rule politics and sought to exploit sectarian loyalties to maintain their control, thus thwarting the creation of a national identity that would include Syria's various identity groups. France's policies reinforced the Alawite identity against the Sunni identity, as the French mandate offered the Alawites a temporary quasi-autonomy.<sup>53</sup> Alawites are followers of the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam, comprising an estimated 12% of Syria's total population, inhabiting the coastal areas in the interior lowlands east of the Alawite Mountains and the rural areas around cities of Homs and Hama. Experts note that throughout its history, the Alawite community has been persecuted politically, socially and economically. Furthermore, the Alawite community has been dominated by a hostile Sunni community that has disparaged the Alawite religious beliefs.<sup>54</sup> The Sunni majority, consisting an estimated 69% of the population, perceived the Alawites as an

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<sup>52</sup> Martha Neff Kessler *Syria: Fragile mosaic of power*, (USA: NDU, 1987),p. 3-14.

<sup>53</sup> Ma'oz, Moshe, *op.cit.*,p.398

<sup>54</sup> Faksh, Mhamud "The Alawi Community of Syria: A new Dominant Political Force" *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 20 No. 2 (Apr. 1984), pp.133-153, p.135.



outsider group and sought hegemony over them.<sup>55</sup> Consequently, France's policies provided the Alawite identity with opportunities for empowerment, however, by offering them autonomous authority, the French, like the Sunnis, excluded the Alawites from a Syrian national identity. Similarly, French policies bolstered the Kurds' transnational affiliation while seeking to manipulate the Kurdish identity. The Kurds are the largest ethnic minority, making up about 10% of the Syrian population, who, generally speaking, are Muslim Sunnis inhabiting the north-east of Syria. In fact, the demise of the Ottoman Empire created an opportunity for the Kurds to achieve their nation-state which is separate from Syria, and therefore, they cooperated with the French who provided the Kurdish enclaves with limited autonomous measures, seeking to construct an alliance with the Kurds to counter the Arab nationalists. Hence, many Syrian Arabs associated the Kurdish identity with external power and separatism, and consequently, the Kurds were excluded from a Syrian identity.<sup>56</sup> The end of the French mandate did not result in the granting of a separate state to the Kurds, instead, an anti-Kurdish sentiment grew among Syrian Arabs, which negatively influenced the Kurdish integration into the Syrian state.

In fact, Syria's ultimate independence in April 1946 presented challenges and opportunities to construct a national identity for the newborn territorial state. Yet, given the mandate's legacy and the historical record of splits between the various identity groups, this chance seems to have been lost, as each identity group pursued its own self-interest. In this vein, during the early years of independence (1946-1949), Syria's political scene was dominated by urban Sunnis who did not formulate strategies to develop a national identity, but instead, were struggling for power.<sup>57</sup> The Alawites, on the other hand, were seeking empowerment and a reduction of their minority status, and therefore sought to hold rank in military institutions.<sup>58</sup> The Kurds, however, limited their pursuit of separation to a quest for political and sociocultural rights. Nevertheless, Kurdish identity was marginalised politically, socially and culturally as Syrian Arabs continued to view the Kurdish minority with suspicions of separatism, that is, they again identified the Kurds as outsiders.<sup>59</sup> In

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Kerim Yildiz *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People*, (London: Pluto Press, 2005) p.24-27

<sup>57</sup> Martha Neff Kessler, *op.cit.*, p.15

<sup>58</sup> Nikolas Van Dam, *op. cit.*, p.27

<sup>59</sup> Kerim Yildiz, *op.cit.*, p. 30

this context, between 1946 and 1963, three key identities dominated Syria's political realm and competed for power. These were; pan-Arabism, seeking affiliation with the Arab states; Pan-Syrianism, promoting the establishment of Greater Syria that would include Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine; and pan-Islamism, advancing the association with the Islamic Umma. However, pan-Arabism emerged as the dominant identity and was the most applicable since it "bridged the Syrian 'mosaic' bringing together the Arabic-speaking minorities, most significantly the Alawites and Christians, with the Sunni majority, albeit excluding non-Arabs such as the Kurds".<sup>60</sup> Indeed, the rise of the Arab Nationalist ideology prompted an official discrimination against the Kurdish identity. Furthermore, in October 1962, the Syrian authority conducted a so-called special census in the Kurdish areas, during which some 120,000 Kurds were denationalised, because the Syrian regime claimed that they had illegally entered Syria from Turkey. Besides this, significant elements of the Kurdish identity, such as language, music and publications were banned. This clearly emphasised the ethnic line between the Kurdish and the Syrian Arab identity.<sup>61</sup>

Against this backdrop, Syria's late president Hafiz Assad (1971-2000), a master in the art of *realpolitik*, attempted to construct a balance between Arab, Syrian and Islamic identities and also between the Alawite, Sunni and Kurdish identity groups. He sought to craft a national identity that would include these three identities, yet he took a contradictory approach. Essentially, Assad made use of the Arab nationalist ideology to legitimise his Alawite regime and to establish a national identity in which all identity groups could be assimilated.<sup>62</sup> Since Assad belonged to the Alawite minority, he adopted a Khaldounian/neo-patrimonial strategy to build his regime. This strategy relied on the Alawite *Asabiyya* "group feeling"<sup>63</sup> to forge a coherent elite, commanding high ranking positions in political and military institutions. Indeed, Alawite *Asabiyya* signifies the backbone of the Assad regime, notwithstanding, Assad never engaged in a direct Alawite rhetoric, he only covertly exploited the Alawite identity and encouraged the Alawites to view the regime as 'theirs' without ever admitting this publicly. But still, by *Asabiyya*, Assad emphasised the Alawite identity against that of the Sunnis and provoked these two identity groups to perceive each other

<sup>60</sup> Hinnebusch, Raymond "Modern Syrian Politics", *History Compass* 6/1 2008. p. 264 pp. 263-285.

<sup>61</sup> "The Kurds in Syria Fueling Separatist Movements in the Region?", (The United States Institute of Peace Special Report 220 April 2009), p 2.

<sup>62</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch 2008, *op. cit.*, p.264

<sup>63</sup> Bassam Tibi *Arab Nationalism; Between Islam and Nation State*, (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1997), p. 139. The Tunisian sociologist and distinguished philosopher Ibn Khaldoun (d. 1406) defines *Asabiyya* as "the ties that enable a group to form a solidarity vis-à-vis other groups". See *ibid*.

as rivals. Additionally, Assad's strategy was underpinned by neo-patrimonial logic which denotes that a leader maintains his power through personal patronage in the bureaucratic institutions and not through law, and hence this system is constructed by loyalties.<sup>64</sup> As the distinguished expert on Syria, Raymond Hinnebusch put it this way: "[Under Hafiz Assad,] Alawi[te] identity and cohesion was enhanced and Alawi[te]s in power often followed the code of a kinship society in favoring their kin in recruitment, and, most significantly in admission to the officer corps".<sup>65</sup> The core of the Assad formula of state-building, relied upon the Alawite *Asabiyya* that prevented a Syrian national identity from functioning properly and diminished its credibility in the eyes of Syrians, as a particular identity group was favoured, despite the tangible alliance that Assad constructed with Sunnis and regardless of the fact that officially, all Syrian citizens were supposed to be equal. Yet, once in office, Assad sought to contain the risk the Sunni majority might pose to his rule and therefore, he shrewdly constructed a social contract with Sunni peasantry in the rural areas and also crafted an alliance with urban Sunnis.<sup>66</sup> In essence, Assad employed carrot-and-stick tactics, vis-à-vis his rival Sunnis, through which he crushed the most powerful Islamic adversary of that time, the Muslim Brotherhood. In February 1982, Assad suppressed a Sunni rebellion in Hama that was seeking to dominate the Alawites. Nevertheless, soon afterward, he aimed to have "accommodated and empowered the apolitical Islamic organisations".<sup>67</sup> By doing so, Assad sought to establish status quo with the Sunni majority and to foster a state-controlled Islam.<sup>68</sup> Nonetheless, Assad policies were colored by divide-and-rule politics which placed different identity groups at odds with one another, such as the Arabs versus the Kurds and Islamists versus secularists. This subsequently increased the fragmentation of identity.<sup>69</sup>

In parallel, the political, social and cultural exclusion of the Kurdish identity by the dominant Arabism ideology continued during the Hafiz Assad tenure. However, Assad opted to adopt a more pragmatic approach and placed the Arabism ideology as a supra-national identity. As regards the

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<sup>64</sup> Hinnebusch, Raymond "Toward a Historical Sociology of State Formation in the Middle East" *Middle East Critique* Vol. 19, No 3, 201-216 (Fall 2010). Also see Hinnebusch, Raymond "Syria: from authoritarian upgrading to revolution" *International Affairs* 88: I, 2012. pp. 95-113, p.97.

<sup>65</sup> Hinnebusch 2001, *op.cit.*, p.70.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 83.

<sup>67</sup> Line Khatib "Islamic Revival and promotion for moderate Islam from above", in Line Khatib, et al., *state and Islam in Baathist Syria: Confrontation or Co-operation?* (St. Andrews: University of St. Andrews, 2012), p 29.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. A discussion on the Sufis and Salafis will be stated in the next chapter.

<sup>69</sup> Caroline Donati *al-'astethna 'a' al-souriyy : bayn al-hadatha w al-mwqawma*, (The Syrian Exception: Between Modernization and Resistance), (Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes Books S.A.L, 2012), p.468.

Kurds, Assad conducted selective measures to integrate the Kurds into the Arab Syrian Republic, such as including some Kurds in governmental institutions. Nevertheless, they were restricted to low rank positions and the Kurdish parties remained 'outsiders' who also suffered from internal division. Furthermore, any symbolic expression of the Kurdish identity continued to be a taboo. In short, Assad applied a mixture of manipulation, divide-and-rule and carrot-and-stick politics, seeking out a balance between redistribution and coercion vis-à-vis the Kurdish problem. Therefore, with an iron fist, he suppressed any attempts to empower the Kurdish identity, whilst on the other hand, he constructed an alliance with some Kurdish nationalists and parties (with Kurdistan Worker Party PKK).<sup>70</sup> Also, Assad allied with some Kurds of the religious brotherhoods, such as Ahmad Kuftaru, the Mufti of the Republic (d. 2004), and the prominent cleric Ramadan al-Buti (d. 2013). Assad's objective with this coalition, was to encourage the Arab-Kurdish brotherhood and merge, under an Islamic umbrella, the Kurdish identity into a Syrian Arab identity. Moreover, Assad used the Kurds to counter his internal and regional foes and to accomplish *realpolitik* ends that, as a result, reinforced the Kurdish identity versus the Arab identity and hindered their integration into an inclusive Syrian identity. For instance, in the late 1970s, Assad exploited the Kurdish identity in his rivalry with Saddam Hussein, the former Iraqi president, by allowing Iraqi Kurdish nationalists to establish a temporary safe haven in the Syrian Kurdish areas that border Iraq. Similarly, in 1982, Assad mobilised Kurdish factions in his suppression of the Islamist revolt which subsequently deepened the Arab-Kurdish splits since the Arab majority regarded the Kurds as the regime's partner in suppressing the Sunni Arab rebellion.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, in the late 1980s until mid-1990s, the Turkish-Syrian conflict, over issues of water and borders, prompted Assad to play the Kurdish card in an attempt to exert pressure on Turkey. This was done by allowing the PPK,- a mass party with a paramilitary wing, based in Turkey and seeking the 'liberation' of Kurdistan- to establish bases in Syria, from which it launched attacks against the Turkish army. This geostrategic cooperation ended when Assad succumbed to the Turkish pressure and withdrew support for the PKK.<sup>72</sup> Parallel to his policies vis-à-vis the Sunni identity and the Alawite identity, Hafiz Assad's strategies toward the Kurds

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<sup>70</sup> Jordi Tejel *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society*, (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 84-89

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 66-67

<sup>72</sup> David McDowall *The Kurds of Syria*, (London: I.B Tauris, 1998), p. 65.

bolstered communal affiliations and diminished the chances of building a cohesive national identity.

In this context, Bashar Assad inherited the presidency in June 2000 and strove to advance his father's approach in a way that eventually triggered identity clashes. The first two years of Bashar's term were marked by a flourish of civil society movements and labeled the *Damascus Spring*.<sup>73</sup> These movements were led by members of the Syrian intelligentsia from various political backgrounds, such as Michal Kilo and Haytham Manna'a. The *Damascus Spring* looked for political reforms and promoted a national identity that sought to eliminate sectarian loyalties. Yet, shortly, the so-called *Damascus Spring* turned into winter as a result of the regime's repression. However, it should be stressed that the civil movements of *Damascus Spring* did not present a unified opposition platform and furthermore, ideological and personal conflicts among its members, together with Assad's suppression, caused its demise.<sup>74</sup> Some three years later, in October 2005, a group of opposition figures based in Syria and in exile, co-founded Damascus Declaration (DD), an umbrella opposition coalition that called for gradual and peaceful transition to a multiple democratic state. In fact, the DD was the first significant attempt to tackle the question of identity directly. It intended to foster Syrian national sentiment and to merge the various sects of the Syrian community into a solid national identity. In other words, based on a civic model of national identity, the DD sought to stress the equality of all Syrians, regardless of their ethnic and sectarian backgrounds. However, like the *Damascus Spring*, suppression by the authoritarian regime and internal fragmentation deactivated the DD's goals.<sup>75</sup> Henceforth, the endeavour by Syrian intelligentsia to bolster a national affiliation waned.

Although the official speech of Bashar Assad endorsed Syrian nationalism under the umbrella of Arabism, he seemed to follow in his father's footsteps in relying on sectarian loyalties. Alawite *Asabiyya* continued to represent the hard core of the regime. In this light, Carsten Wieland argues, that during Bashar's tenure "the regime had become more Alawite compared to Hafez's time".<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Joe Pace and Joshua Landis "The Syrian Opposition the Struggle for Unity and Relevance 2003-2005", pp 121-140 in Fred H. Lawson *Demystifying Syria* (London: Middle East Institute, 2009), p. 122

<sup>74</sup> Carsten Wieland *op.cit.*, p. 106-107.

<sup>75</sup> "Political Reform and the Reconfiguration of National Identity in Syria", Arab Reform initiative Website, accessed 24/10/2013, available at <http://www.arab-reform.net/political-reform-and-reconfiguration-national-identity-syria>

<sup>76</sup> Carsten Wieland *op. cit.*, p.74

A good indicator is the fall of some Sunni old guard of Hafiz's regime such as the former vice president, Abdul al-halim Khaddam, and the former Chief of staff Hikmat Shihabi. Moreover, Bashar advanced an economic liberalisation project that unintentionally backfired on the issue of identity and damaged the tangible balance that Hafiz Assad constructed between the identity groups. In short, the neo-liberal economic project by Bashar was directed to empower the elite whether Sunni or Alawite and was mainly directed toward the benefit of the big cities, like Damascus and Aleppo whilst neglecting the socio-economic conditions of other cities and towns, such like Dar'a (southern Syria) and Baniyas (western Syria). This, subsequently, widened the socio-economic gaps and demolished the social contract that Hafez Assad strove to establish with Sunni workers, peasants and members of the rural class.<sup>77</sup> In fact, Bashar's policies enriched a loyal group of crony capitalists, such as Bashar's first cousin, Rami Makhlouf, who played a vital role in triggering Sunni identity against that of Alawites as he enjoyed an absolute monopoly over Syria's economic affairs.<sup>78</sup> Although the former allied with some Sunni businessmen, like Ratib al-Shalah and Mohamed Hmashu, he still excluded other urban Sunnis and also, importantly, excluded the deprived Sunnis of the remote areas. Hereafter, in the eyes of many Sunnis, Bashar's economic project was limited to the regime-connected cronies who were drawn from his clan and the Sunni bourgeoisie. In fact, this revived class/communal hatreds and reinforced the Alawite identity against that of the Sunnis. Not surprisingly, offices belonging to Makhlouf were among the governmental buildings targeted by Sunni protesters in Dar'a during the early days of the 2011 uprising.<sup>79</sup> Yet, it has to be noted that many Sunnis who benefited from the regime policy stood with the Assad regime against the uprising.

Indeed, Bashar sought to co-opt the Islamic movements and to advance the status quo that his father crafted with Sunni factions.<sup>80</sup> Thus, he deployed several procedures, such as giving a free hand to Sufi movements -Sufism is the largely non-political tradition of Sunnism which focuses on the role of Islamic principles in regulating society-, and turning a blind eye to *Qubayssiat* - a group of Sunni women established in Damascus by Munira al-Qubaysi during the 1960s to promote an apolitical Islam focusing on personal piety. Remarkably, during the Assad's tenure

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<sup>77</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch 2012 *op. cit.*

<sup>78</sup> Adrian Bloomfield "Syria; The Hardliners responsible for state brutality" *Telegraph Newspaper* (27/04/2011)

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Line Khatib 2011, *op.cit.*, p. 141.

*Qubayssiat* “operated a powerful network among the wives, daughter and mothers of affluent businessmen in Damascus”-.<sup>81</sup> In parallel, Assad junior intended to present himself as a good Muslim in the eyes of Sunnis and therefore, throughout his presidency, he regularly attended religious ceremonies and, unlike his father, he permitted the presentation of Sunni symbols during celebration of religious events.<sup>82</sup> Ostensibly, Assad’s objective was twofold: firstly to legitimise his rule among Sunnis and secondly, to counter the secular opposition. Nevertheless, his tactical alliance with Sufis in Damascus did not mend fences with all Sunnis of Syria, particularly with those of the remote areas who were deprived as a result of the regime’s neo-liberal approaches. Furthermore, no realistic political representation was given to Islamists, although some Islamist members were represented in the parliament, for example, Sheikh Mohamed Habash, who often appeared on Syrian State TV, talking about moderate Islam (*‘al-Islam al mu’atadil’*). It was very much believed among Sunnis that those members were only tools in the hand of the regime. Apparently, Bashar Assad’s policy of advancing his father’s regime contained myriad flaws that triggered the identity issue. He opened up the economy, but only for particular identity groups, namely, Alawite patrons and the Sunni elite. His alliance included a specific faction of Sunnis, urban businessmen, and the Sufi clergy, whilst discounting the Sunni peasantry in rural areas. Furthermore, in addition to his manipulation of the Sufi identity, Bashar instrumentalised the Salafis - Salafism is a branch of Sunnism that aims to restructure the state and the society in line with Quranic and Sharia law-<sup>83</sup> for *realpolitik* gains. As during the early years of the 2000s, Bashar allowed some Syrian Salafis to infiltrate Iraq to counter the U.S. Consequently, his approaches bolstered a Salafi sentiment that is at odds with the Sufis, the Alawites and the secularists.<sup>84</sup>

On the other hand, the Kurdish identity was excluded from the circle of power and from the expression of any symbolic features. Like his father, Bashar employed both hard-power and soft-power strategies towards the Kurdish question. Yet, unprecedentedly, vehement confrontations erupted between the Arab and the Kurds in March 2004 in the town of Qamishli, northeast of Syria, when a football match between a Kurdish affiliated team and an Arab team provoked clashes between the two sets of fans. The Arabs were displaying portraits of Saddam Hussein while the

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<sup>81</sup> Carsten Wieland, *op.cit.*, p. 165.

<sup>82</sup> Khatib 2012, *op. cit.*, p. 35 . See appendix 6.

<sup>83</sup> Daurius Figueira *Salafi Jihadi Discourse of Sunni Islam*, (USA: 2011, Universe), p. 1.

<sup>84</sup> See appendix 7. A discussion on Salafis will be delivered in the next chapter.

Kurds were chanting pro-American slogans that triggered the fight. In brief, the Assad regime responded by suppressing the Kurds and this prompted anti-Assad protests to spread throughout the Kurdish enclaves. Unsurprisingly, Syria's Arab majority took the side of the regime, associating the Kurds with external power and separatist motivation, and as a result, it reinforced the line between the Kurdish and the Arab identity.<sup>85</sup> After punishing the protesters, Assad junior successfully re-established the status quo with the Kurds through mediators in the Kurdish community.<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, the political, social and cultural marginalisation of the Kurds resumed and furthermore, in 2009, a drought in the Kurdish area affected 1.3 million inhabitants, most of whom were underprivileged Kurds. In September 2009, some 300,000 inhabitants of Raqa and Hassaka fled to makeshift camps on the edges of Damascus. The Syrian government could not develop a suitable strategy to remedy this situation, rather the security services suppressed Syrian Arab activists who were distributing aid to these camps.<sup>87</sup>

## **Conclusion:**

Present-day Syria came into existence as a result of the political game of the world's great powers that imposed political borders on a heterogeneous community. Therefore, neither a solid national identity nor a sense of nationhood underpinned the creation of the Syrian state. Instead, sectarian cleavages persisted between Sunnis, Alawites and the Kurds and furthermore, they were aggravated. Each of these identity groups was seeking to exclude the other. In this context, it was an extremely challenging mission to unite these identity groups into a harmonious unit, particularly, if a long-oppressed minority came to rule a hostile majority. It should, therefore, be said that Hafiz Assad sought to balance these competing identities and to create a national cohesion, but through a contradictory approach. Simultaneously, Hafiz Assad employed soft-power and hard-power strategies to assimilate Sunnis, Kurds and the Alawite into an inclusive

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<sup>85</sup> Julie Gutheir "The 2004 Events in al-Qamshili: has the Kurdish question erupted in Syria?", pp., 105-120 in Fred Lawson. *op. cit.*, p. 110

<sup>86</sup> Jordi Tejel, *op.cit.*, p. 117

<sup>87</sup>The author was among these civil activists. For informative report on the draught see "Villages Struggle in Syria" BBC website, accessed on 24/5/2013, available at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in\\_depth/8291107.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/8291107.stm) and



national identity. However, the Khaldounian/neo-patrimonial formula of Assad senior, upgraded by Assad junior, thwarted the formation of a strong national identity and instead, bolstered communal identities. Moreover, both Assads manipulated Sunni, Alawite and Kurdish identities to consolidate their power and, whereas their policies worked throughout some four decades, their long-term implications proved to be lethal. In addition, the economic liberalisation project of Bashar Assad seemed to destroy the fragile balance between sectarian identities that his father built up over some thirty years.

Yet, this is not to say that policies of the Assad dynasty, are solely responsible for the eruption of identity clashes during the uprising. Rather, as has been argued above, in the establishment of the current Syria, a concrete national identity was not achieved and each sectarian group was seeking empowerment. Nevertheless, the Assads' rhetoric vis-à-vis Alawite, Sunni and Kurdish identities, caused more fragmentation in an already fractured national identity and played off the identity game in a way that eventually backfired on the dynasty and on the country.

### **The Syrian uprising: an informative summary:**

In late February 2011, a group of boys, aged between 10 and 15, wrote anti-regime graffiti on the walls of their school in Dar'a, in the southeast of Syria, which stated: 'the people want to overthrow the regime'. This was in fact, the motto of the so-called *Arab Spring*, which protesters in Egypt, Yemen and Libya, at that time, were broadcasting throughout the Arab world through their chant. The arrest and torture of the Dar'a boys by Syria's security services provoked civil activists in Damascus to declare 15<sup>th</sup> March 2011 as a 'Day of Rage' against the authoritarian regime. In that day, dozens of secular youths marched in the heart of Damascus, chanting slogans for freedom and dignity. Shortly afterward however, the regime forces punished them.<sup>88</sup> Three days later,

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<sup>88</sup>Foad Ajami *op.cit.*, p.75

thousands of protesters who were mostly underprivileged Sunnis, marched in Dar'a, calling for political reforms, whilst excluding the fall of Assad from their demands. The Syrian regime forces responded with an iron fist, firing live ammunition on the crowd and consequently inciting protesters to upgrade their demands to the ousting of Bashar Assad.<sup>89</sup> From this point onward, the Syrian uprising was triggered. Pictures and footages of protests were circulated in the social media, which as the following chapters will illustrate, played a vital role in fueling identity clashes. Rapidly, anti-Assad demonstrations spread to ethnically-mixed Syrian cities and towns such as Banias, Homs, Hama and Idlib in western Syria. Protesters of these areas were mostly pious Sunnis who suffered from marginalisation due to Bashar's economic policies. Importantly, from this time forth, the socio-economic background of protesters was not limited to the secular educated youth of urban middle-class who had initially orchestrated the 'Day of Anger' in Damascus.

The Assad regime, as the next chapter will discuss in detail, employed hard-power methods to eliminate the uprising. The regime associated protesters with external powers and with fundamentalists whilst characterising the uprising as a 'conspiracy' against the Arab Nationalist ideology of Syria, and also as *fitna* ('sedition') that aims to ruin Syria's sectarian stability. Moreover, since the outset of the uprising, Assad's policies exploited Alawite *Asabiyya* to suppress the rebellion. Similarly, Assad manipulated his longstanding alliance with the Sunni merchant class and with some Sufi clergymen to counter his rivals.<sup>90</sup> In fact, July 2011 marked a turning point in the uprising, as soldiers then started to defect from the Syrian Army and, together with some civil rebels, they founded the Free Syrian Army (FSA) -a paramilitary wing of the rebellion- and henceforth, the uprising turned into an armed struggle. Although, anti-Assad militias mushroomed, a united leadership for these militias was not established. Moreover, like the majority of civil protesters, these paramilitaries were dominated by Sunnis.<sup>91</sup> Also, importantly, radical Islamists came to play a pivotal role in the uprising, as these groups were the most committed, the best fighters and were on the ground in Syria, unlike much of the secular opposition that went into exile. On the other hand, from the onset of the uprising, the classic Syrian opposition strove for empowerment and therefore myriad parties, movements, coalitions and councils

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<sup>89</sup>Carsten Wieland *op.cit.* p. 21

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, p. 23-27

<sup>91</sup> Derek Henry Flood "An Overview of Syria's Armed Revolution" (paper presented at the Combating Terrorism Center Vol. 5 Issue 4 April 2012 pp. 1-4)

emerged. Few were based in Syria, while the others were formed in exile. Yet, Syria's political opposition is deeply fragmented and has not managed to form a monolithic platform, suffering instead from personal and ideological divisions.<sup>92</sup> In this context, as the following chapters will discuss, external state and non-state actors played significant roles in the uprising, by providing political, military and economic support for a particular group against the other. These actors were involved in the uprising for *realpolitik* gains and, henceforward, they shifted the uprising into a proxy war among regional and international powers.

#### Conclusion:

The Syrian uprising has its roots in a peaceful movement that demanded social justice, and yet, it rapidly morphed into an armed struggle between various actors. The uprising is characterised by deep divisions between all the anti-Assad factions, such as: rural /urban, secular/Islamist and the new-generation/old-generation. More importantly, as the following chapters will demonstrate, the Syrian uprising overlaps with the war of identities.

## Chapter Three

### **The continuous reproduction of the Sunni and Alawite identities**

At the time of writing, there is an ongoing and vigorous fight for hegemony between the Sunni identity and the Alawite identity. The status quo that existed between the two identity groups has been destroyed, with each party attempting to maximise its gains over the other. This chapter addresses the interaction between the several elements that account for this conflict. The chapter is divided into two main sections; the first section examines the orchestration of Sunni and Alawite identity clashes from above, focusing on the roles of the Syrian regime, the Sunni political entrepreneurs and the external state and non-state actors. The second section analyses the roles of symbolic features in inciting identity clashes from below.

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<sup>92</sup> Carsten Wieland, *op. cit.*, p. 185

## 1. Orchestrating Sunni and Alawite identity clashes from above:

### 1.1 *The Syrian regime rhetoric vis-à-vis the uprising: playing with sectarian fire?*

Since its very beginnings, the Syrian regime has responded to the uprising as an ‘internal crisis’ that endangers the very existence of the regime. Accordingly, the regime’s objectives were to crush the uprising and then to institute some reforms for containing any future risk of another uprising breaking out. However, this approach has only served to exacerbate the ‘crisis’ and in doing so has proved itself to be irrational. As observers agree, the Syrian regime played the sectarian card since the outbreak of the uprising by inciting the Alawite religious minority to fight against a Sunni majority, and by continuously accusing fundamentalists of *tatiyyf* (‘sectarianisation’) the ‘crisis’. In parallel, the regime strove to promote itself as the only entity capable of preventing civil war and of maintaining the sectarian stability.<sup>93</sup>

In essence, the Syrian regime employed two strategies in dealing with the uprising, both of which have had significant repercussions on the reproduction of Alawite and Sunni identities. These strategies have been labeled as *al-hal al-‘amny* (‘security solution’) and *al-hal al-‘askary* (‘military solution’).<sup>94</sup> To briefly clarify, the ‘security solution’ was activated in April 2011, and denotes the deployment of forces loyal to the regime, namely the security services and *Shabiyyha*. *Shabiyyha* refers to the pro-Assad militias that consisted mainly of Alawites, and which played a vital role in the uprising. According to an Alawite resident of Homs, who has relatives working with a *Shabiyyha* network operating in Damascus, a *Shabiyyh* (singular of *Shabiyyha*) earns around \$300 per month and works an eight-hour day.<sup>95</sup> In Arabic, *Shabiha* comes from the word *Shabah*, meaning ‘ghost’. Originally, it referred to the Alawite mafia that operated during the 1970s under Riffat Assad (uncle of Bashar Assad), and which “smuggled contraband, all the while earning a reputation for unrelenting violence”.<sup>96</sup> During the uprising, the security services and *Shabiyyha* consisted primarily of Alawites, whose main mission was to punish anti-Assad activists, the majority of whom were Sunnis. Unlike the security services, who are official employers at

<sup>93</sup>“Syria’s Mutating Conflict”, International Crisis Group (ICG), N 128-1 (Brussels and Damascus, August 2012),p 5,6.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Author’s interview with an anonymous Alawite, 8/9/2012 in Damascus.

<sup>96</sup> “The rise of Shabiha” Middle East Online Website, accessed on 22-3-2013, available at: <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=53322>.

governmental institutions, *Shabiyyha* networks were not formally registered as government forces, despite having been funded and armed by the regime and some of its patrons.<sup>97</sup>

With the eruption of the uprising, these loyalist forces frequently besieged and attacked mosques in rebel areas that were the primary sites for anti-Assad protests, and which were mainly to be found in Sunni districts. Some cases in point are jdiyydyt ‘artuz in northern Damascus. Here, the *Shabiha* reside in *masaken al-hars* (‘Guards’ Houses’), established in 1998, a type of residential compound located north of jdiyydyt ‘artuz where Alawite officers and soldiers reside with their families. During the uprising, these Alawite forces besieged the central mosque in jdiyydyt ‘artuz and attacked protesters.<sup>98</sup> This situation also applied to Homs, where *Shabiyyha* of the muhajreen quarter (a lower-class district at the edges of eastern Homs predominated by Alawites), cracked down on protesters in the nearby dyr-b’lba area, which is inhabited mainly by Sunnis. According to an Alawite resident of Homs, *Shabiyyha* of muhajreen played an essential role in the clashes between Sunnis and Alawites. In his own words:

“Muhajreen’s *Shabiha* protected our areas. Without them, the Sunnis would have smashed us”.<sup>99</sup>

Notably, forces loyal to the regime often displayed identifiers of their communal belongings, such as the Zulfiqar sword. A sword with two blades that the Islamic Prophet Mohamed gave to his cousin Ali bin abi Talib, this sword is an important holy symbol for Alawites and Shiites.<sup>100</sup> Additionally, many members of the regime’s forces revealed tattoos that depicted their religious identity. For instance, one member’s tattoo was a piece of Arabic script, which read *ya Ali* (‘Oh Ali’) referring to Ali bin abi Taleb, an Alawite icon.<sup>101</sup> Moreover, members of the security forces and *Shabiyyha* deliberately spoke with strong Alawite accents while undertaking their mission.<sup>102</sup> Expressively, these symbolic features acted as signifiers of the Alawite identity and emphasised the sectarian line between Alawites and the other identity groups.

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<sup>97</sup>Ibid. see appendix 8-9

<sup>98</sup>Fieldwork. jdiyydyt ‘rtuz on 24/7/20112.

<sup>99</sup>Author’s interview with an anonymous Alawite via Skype 13/3/2013.

<sup>100</sup>M. R. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen *Islam & World Peace: Explanations of a Sufi*, (USA: Fellowship Press, 2002), p 82. Also see appendix 10-11.

<sup>101</sup>Fieldwork in Damascus and its suburbs, February - October 2012.

<sup>102</sup>As a reaction, many Sunni activists replaced the letter *qaf* in Arabic (which is stressed in the Alawite accent) with the letter *hamza* while writing commentaries on social media, which sparked a wave of criticism among Syrians.

In such a context, the regime's security solution could not come to fruition. Instead, the 'crisis' began to accelerate rapidly, as the violence used against protesters turned more and more Syrians against the regime. Most importantly, the Alawites' involvement in combating the rebels resulted in a Sunni counter-mobilisation. In February 2012, the regime's 'security solution' was upgraded to a 'military solution', which involved the nationwide deployment of the Syrian army and heavy shelling of rebel regions. Homs, in western Syria, was the first zone to be subjected to this military solution. On the ground, bombardments targeted Sunni areas such as bab-'amur of Homs. The fact that the Alawite quarters in the very same district remained unharmed by the shelling helped to fuel the Sunni versus Alawite identity clashes. For instance, during the regime's military operations in bab-'amur in February 2012, Alawite districts like al-zahra and al-nizha that are approximately 6km away from bab-'amur remained completely unscathed by the nearby artillery fire. Furthermore, these areas were not subjected to the same humanitarian crisis resulting from fuel and food shortages as the Sunni districts were subjected to. An Alawite resident of al-nizha gave an eyewitness account of the situation at the time:

"Life looks very normal here. Most shops are open, flour and fuel are available. You can see people smoking shisha at the coffee shops. We hear the shelling next door, we try to act normally, but all of us are afraid. None of us dares to leave *hartu* ('his alley')".<sup>103</sup>

Furthermore, the regime's forces established their bases in some Alawite districts, such as in *masaken al-haras* of jdiyydyt 'artuz,<sup>104</sup> from which they targeted Sunni areas. Additionally, *Shabiiyyha* and soldiers allowed themselves to be filmed as they tortured Sunni protesters while speaking in tough Alawite accents. Such videos were widely circulated among Syrians on social media and on other online mainstream networks, and they elicited a collective radicalisation of Sunni identity. However, given the propaganda war of disinformation between all sides, the accuracy of such accounts cannot be verified. Nevertheless, such videos catalysed the same process of the reinforcement of sectarian identities amongst the various identity groups. Viewed in this light, the regime loyal forces' looting of houses in hot zones, (and the selling of these looted items

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<sup>103</sup> Author's interview with an anonymous Alawite 20/2/2012 email.

<sup>104</sup> Fieldwork in Jdiyydyt 'artuz in July 24/2012. The regime forces were based in the *masaken al-haras* area and also in a nearby hill from which they shot at the towns of fadel and 'artuz, targeting members of the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

in public markets established mostly in Alawite districts) is one of the consequences of this chaotic situation. These markets were dubbed as *souq al-sunnih li al-masrwqat*, ('the Sunni market for looted items'). One popular market was located nearby *masaken al-hars* in the mu'damiyaa area, northern jdiyydyt 'artuz. Here, furniture and electronic devices like LCD televisions and iPads were displayed under huge portraits of Assad, and in which the salesmen were members of the Alawite identity group.<sup>105</sup> Certainly, looting can be viewed as a natural consequence of civil wars, and is provoked by poverty and chaos. However, regardless of whether the looting was motivated by poverty or ethnic grievances, it constituted a direct violation of the 'others' identity. Consequently, the looting helped to inflame the Sunni versus Alawite identity clashes.

Seemingly, by deploying Alawite-dominated forces, the Syrian regime projected the uprising as a sectarian conflict and an anti-Alawite movement. As a result, Alawites were made to feel that they were fighting for their survival. Certainly, as is discussed below, the policies and discourses of many anti-Assad Sunnis have verified the claims of the regime. Therefore, many Alawites could not perceive any alternative way of surviving other than to fight for the regime. Salim, an Alawite colonel of Homs, stresses that Alawites are fighting with the Assad forces for their own survival rather than for Assad *per se*. In his own words:

"We are a minority here and the Sunnis want to drive us out. The question is not about Bashar as a person, but if he goes, the Alawites will be in danger".<sup>106</sup>

Hence, the *security dilemma* clearly interplayed with the regime's policies, and consequently positioned the Alawite identity at odds with that of the Sunnis. A 28-year-old Alawite of Latakia expressed fears for the Alawites fate in post-Assad era:

"Although Latakia is relatively calm, we are extremely afraid. They [anti-Assad Sunnis] claim that they will forgive those Alawites who do not have blood on their hands. But how they would be able to identify every single Alawite who has blood on his hands? And what would happen to us if the regime failed? I keep asking myself".<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup>Filed work in mu'damiyaa on 1/6/2012 where the authors conducted myriad of interviews with residents there. Also a report about similar market in Homs was broadcasted in Al-Jazeera TV which one should take into an account that is a biased source. see the Al-Jazeera report "souq al-sunna lil masrouqat" ('Sunni market for looted stuff'), YouTube accessed on 14/3/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fp3k1SKff7c>

<sup>106</sup> Cited in "The Alawite Dilemma in Homs" jadaliyya website, accessed on 8/5/2013, available at: <http://egypt.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/11122/the-alawite-dilemma-in-homs>.

<sup>107</sup>Author's interview with an anonymous Alawite 4/4/2013.

It is worthy to note here that this thesis does not suggest that the Alawite are united in their stances vis-à-vis the uprising. Rather the thesis argues that the Syrian regime instrumentalised Alawites for *realpolitik* ends. More importantly, it seems that the *security dilemma* interacts with the regime policies and triggered the majority of Alawites to support Assad for their own survival. Indeed, the insecurity crisis has provoked Alawites who reside in ethnically mixed areas to flee to the villages that they originally came from. Manar, a 26 year-old Sunni of jdiyydyt 'artuz assures that, with the escalation of the violence, Alawite men of *masaken el-haras* evacuated their families for fear that they would be executed. This, in his eyes, is likely to be occurring in a post-Assad era. Manar blames not only the regime for initiating the clashes between Alawites and Sunnis, but also those Alawites who, according to him, have allowed themselves to be manipulated by the regime:

“Prior to the uprising, Alawites of *masaken al-haras* seemed to integrate fairly well with the Sunnis of 'artuz town. They used to send their children to schools in jdiyydyt 'artuz and do their shopping there. Everything looked normal at that time, but after the uprising I do not think that these Alawites would be able to live peacefully with us again. I do not know what would happen, but what I'm sure about is that in a post-Assad era, *masaken al-haras* would not stand there anymore. Not a single Alawite would be allowed to stay there. Too much blood has been shed by them”.<sup>108</sup>

As the conflict continued to escalate, several incidents of mass killing were reported, particularly in areas that are divided across ethnic lines and in which each identity group tends to blame the other for perpetrating such killings. A case in point is the al-houla massacre, al-houla is a tiny town northwest of Homs that is dominated by Sunnis. The massacre took place on the evening of May 25, 2012 when armed men killed 92 Sunni civilians, including 32 children. The Syrian regime accused 'terrorist gangs', while Sunni rebels claimed that the perpetrators were Alawite men from the bordering town of al-qabu, which is mostly populated by Shiite and Alawites.<sup>109</sup> A second case in point took place in jdiyydyt 'artuz on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 2012 in which, Sunni residents of 'artuz interviewed by the author, claimed that Alawites of *masaken al-haras* executed some 35 anti-Assad Sunnis. However, only one week before the massacre, Sunni rebels of jdiyydyt 'artuz

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<sup>108</sup> Author's interview with Manar 5/8/2012 in jdiyydyt 'rtuz.

<sup>109</sup> “Why the Syrian regime is killing babies”, CNN website, accessed on 3/5/2013, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/05/31/opinion/ghitis-syria-killing-children>.



kidnapped three Alawite men from *masaken al-haras*.<sup>110</sup> Graphic videos of the brutal killings that showed how some of the dead had been killed with knives or blunt objects spread like wildfire through the online mainstream community, which consequently intensified the *security dilemma* for both identity groups. In March 2013, a United Nations Human Rights report assured that Assad's forces had "commit[ed] mass killings which are at times sectarian in nature".<sup>111</sup> Yet, the report stresses that both sides were guilty of carrying out violations against civilians during the conflict, and that Sunni militants executed Alawite militiamen and established detention centers in Homs and Aleppo. Moreover, an enormous number of video clips uploaded to the internet showed Sunni militants torturing Alawites. Some Sunnis applauded these videos, while others strongly denounced the use of such rhetoric.<sup>112</sup> Despite the fact that the authenticity of these videos and the accuracy of the reports of mass killings cannot be guaranteed, their existence gives a broad indication of the nature of the insecurity crisis that each identity group was confronting. This situation served to intensify the identity clashes.

Against this backdrop, the Syrian regime's policies of security and military solutions vis-à-vis the uprising were designed to eliminate the 'crisis'. However, these policies failed to quell the uprising. Seemingly, the core of these policies rested on the concept of Alawite *Asabiyya*, which reinforces the Alawite identity and reproduces that of the Sunnis. One can argue that the Assad regime was able to exploit *Asabiyya* to mobilise Alawites from different socio-economic backgrounds; from lower-class like the muhajreen in Homs to the ranks of the elite, of which his cousin Rami Makhlouf was a member. Together, these socially disparate Alawites would fight against the uprising and link their survival explicitly to that of Assad. In fact, the policies implemented by the Assad regime manipulated identity of both groups for *realpolitik* gains and thus they played key role in reproducing sectarian identities and in inciting identity clashes

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<sup>110</sup>For more information about the massacre see "Syria video purport to show new killing in Jadeite Artuz", Huffingtonpost website, accessed on 8/5/2013, available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/02/syria-video-massacre-jdeidet-artouz\\_n\\_1733591.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/02/syria-video-massacre-jdeidet-artouz_n_1733591.html)

<sup>111</sup>"Syria Massacres: Government Reportedly Using Local Militias For Mass Killings", Huffingtonpost website, accessed on 3/5/2013, available at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/11/syria-massacres-government\\_n\\_2851665.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/11/syria-massacres-government_n_2851665.html)

<sup>112</sup> For samples of such videos see "'idam al-Shabiyyha al-alawiyyin b'd tahrir sraqeb", ('The execution of an Alawite Shabiha after the liberalization of Saraqeb'), YouTube, accessed on 3/5/2013 available, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gv7hAJ-1HAU>. Also see "'urqusi ya 'aniaa: 'idam al qanasa al-alawiyyin al-arb' fi die al-zour", ('Dance you Anya' the execution of four Alawite snipers in Dir al-Zour'), YouTube, accessed on 5/5/2013, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGYkxRxhgy4>

between Alawites and Sunnis from above. The repercussions of such an approach proved to be lethal for all those involved. By inciting Alawites to engage in a warfare with the Sunnis, the regime re-ignited the strife between the Alawites and the Sunnis that had been temporarily cooled by the thirty-year alliance that Assad senior had established with the Sunni community. Furthermore, the chaotic situation, the sectarian behavior of Assad's forces and the *security dilemma* each allowed the regime to trigger the identity clashes between Sunnis and Alawites from above.

### ***1.2. Attempts by anti-Assad Sunni political entrepreneurs to reshape the Sunni identity:***

For many Sunni clergymen, the Syrian uprising endowed them with a chance to reestablish the power balance between Sunnis and Alawites. Hence, they took advantage of this highly polarised atmosphere to reproduce a particular version of Sunni identity that would eventually ensure their dominance. Certainly, the self-reinforcement of Sunni identity acted as a bold provocation to the Alawites, and is another factor that contributed to the ignition of identity clashes. All of anti-Assad Sunni actors relied upon material and symbolic features to craft a Sunni identity and to strengthen their grip on power. The following section examines the reproduction of the primary trends in Sunni identity: Sufism, Salafism and Jihadi-Salafism. Throughout the first two years of the uprising, each of these identities were competing for hegemony.

#### ***1.2.1 The Sufi Identity:***

Sufi identity is considered to be apolitical, as it does not seek the establishment of an Islamic state. Rather, it focuses on the role of Islamic principles in regulating society. Notably, since the outset of the uprising, the Syrian regime has deployed its longstanding paradigm of divide-and-rule politics. Accordingly, the regime pitted the Sufis, Salafis and secularists against each other, which consequently intensified the identity clashes. In short, the Assad regime manipulated Sufi ulama like Ramadan al-Buti (d. 2013), a top Sunni preacher, and Ahmed Hassoun, Syria's Grand Mufti. During the uprising, both of these men gave their vocal support to the Assad regime and endorsed its agenda. For instance, in March 2013, Hassoun issued a fatwa urging Syrian Muslims to fight for the regime. He stressed that supporting Assad was a religious obligation and asked parents to

push their children "towards this duty".<sup>113</sup> In fact, Hassoun and Buti's stances in relation to the uprising intensified the cleavages between Sufis on the one hand, and between Sufis and Salafis on the other hand. Furthermore, the assassination of Hassoun's son and of the Buti himself increased these cleavages.<sup>114</sup> Therefore, the Assad regime adopted its approach of manipulating Sunni identity and of fracturing the already fragmented Sunni cliques. With this approach, the regime was able to nurture the growth of an anti-Sufi and anti-Alawite brand of Salafism, and to spread fears among Sufis that Salafism would become dominant.<sup>115</sup> Despite the fact that (as has been discussed in chapter two) throughout Syria's modern history Sufis have occupied a hegemonic place in the religious structure and have succeeded in consolidating their access to official institutions,<sup>116</sup> they were severely weakened by the uprising and lost a great deal of ground to their longstanding rivals, the Salafis. Notably, Sufis who were divided in their stances towards Assad became increasingly alarmed as Salafis gained momentum and hence they struggled to craft a power base from which to oppose the Salafis. Some of the Sufi ulama opted to support Assad, while others decided to support the uprising. The following section studies the attempts of two influential anti-Assad Sufi sheikhs to reproduce the Sufi identity. The first of these Sheikhs is Usama Rifai, the eldest son of Sheikh Abdul Karim Rifai (d. 1973), a prominent Damascene figure who established religious charitable networks in Damascus some fifty years ago. The second Sheikh is Kraiyym Rajih, a scholar of Quranic recitation and a former student of Sheikh Hasan Habannaka (d. 1978) who, with Abdul Karim Rifai, played an important role in reviving Islamic practice in Damascus during the 1960s.<sup>117</sup> In essence, Usama Rifai and Kraiyym Rajih represent powerful Sufi players who, prior to the uprising, enjoyed a monopoly over Syria's Sunni realm. During the uprising, they sought to empower the Sufi identity over other Sunni identities. The grassroots

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<sup>113</sup> "In Secular Syria Top Muslim clerics picks sides in Civil War", National Public Radio website, accessed on 8/5/2013, available at: <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2013/03/12/174098975/in-secular-syria-top-muslim-cleric-picks-sides-in-civil-war>

<sup>114</sup> "Sheikh Mohammad Said Ramadan al-Buti, Syrian Pro-Assad Cleric, Killed in Damascus bombing", Huffingtonpost website, accessed on 3/5/2013, available at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/21/sheikh-mohammad-said-ramadan-al-buti-killed\\_n\\_2925898.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/21/sheikh-mohammad-said-ramadan-al-buti-killed_n_2925898.html). Also see "Son of Syria's grand mufti, professor killed in ambush near Ibla University", al-Arabiya website, accessed on 3/5/2013, available at <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/10/02/169872.html>

<sup>115</sup> Jawad Qureshi "The Discourses of the Damascenes Sunni 'Ulama during the 2011 Revolution", in Line Khatibe et. al *State and Islam in Baathist Syria Confrontion or co-optation?* (St-Andrews, St Andrews University:2012), p 64,73.

<sup>116</sup> Thomas Pierret "Sunni Clergy Politics in the Cities of Ba'thi Syria", in Fred H. Lawson *Demystifying Syria* (Lebanon, SAQI, 2009), p.72.

<sup>117</sup> Jawad Qureshi *op.cit.* p, 65- 74

support for these clerics stemmed from the Damascene upper and middle-classes, which have a strong influence over the *kafruseh*, *midan*, and *malki* quarters of Damascus. These are upper- and middle-class areas, inhabited mostly by Sunni Damascenes. In the early months of the uprising, protests exploded from the mosques where Rifai and Rajih gave their Friday sermons, as both clerics were known to express their vocal solidarity with the uprising. For instance, in his Friday sermon of July 2011, Usama Rifai criticised the regime's security solution and highlighted the principles of freedom and democracy, calling on Syrians "not [to] fear anyone but the Great God".<sup>118</sup> He went on to accuse the regime of manipulating sectarian identities and provoking conflict. Rifai denounced the state's rhetoric and warned of its implications, saying that:

"[This rhetoric] plays with fire, and who plays with fire will ultimately burn his fingers, and then the fire will burn the green and the dry [i.e. everything]".<sup>119</sup>

In essence, Rifai and Rajih relied simultaneously on materialistic and symbolic elements to reproduce a Sufi identity for the Sunnis, recalling the principles of Sufism in their discourse and citing from the Quran and Hadith. On the other hand, both sheikhs strove to create charitable networks and to establish a popular base. Notably, Rifai and Rajih established contact channels with anti-Assad protesters, and via these channels both clerics aimed to reinforce a Sufi identity that is based on *al-Islam al-mu'tadel*, a moderate version of Islam. Unlike fundamentalists, Rifai and Rajih embodied the Syrian uprising as a popular movement to oust an authoritarian regime and not as a religious struggle against the Alawite faith. Neither of them promoted the creation of a theocracy. Instead, they advocated democracy, tolerance and nationalism whilst emphasising the significance of these norms in Islamic doctrines. Therefore, the Sufi identity that Rifai and Rajih were attempting to reinforce seemed more compatible with an inclusive Syrian civic identity than the one promoted by Sunni Sheikhs of other schools of thought. For instance, in a broadcast interview, Rifai stressed the importance of pluralism and democracy in post-Assad Syria, claiming that:

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<sup>118</sup> "al-Shaikh Usama Rifai yatahadath 'an shabiyyhat al-nizam" ('Sheikh Usama Rifai talks about the regime Shabiha'), YouTube, accessed on 12-3-2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XSsIBeYfg0>.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid

“The Syrian revolution is for all shades of Syrian society [...] after the fall of the regime, with God willing, sectarianism will be erased from our history”.<sup>120</sup>

In another interview, however, Rifai emphasised that Islamists should occupy supreme roles in Syrian politics after the uprising:

“Islamists should be presented because they sacrificed their blood for the revolution while others were just watching”.<sup>121</sup>

In essence, Sufis were aiming not only to retain the authority over Syria’s Sunni realm that they had enjoyed during the Assads’ tenures, but also to upgrade it. Unlike fundamentalists, Sufis did not use anti-Alawite discourse, nor did they promote a bellicose rhetoric in relation to secular ideologies. Also, unlike Salafis and Jihadis, these clerics were not funded by state or non-state actors. Rather, they relied on the Damascene elite (mainly the pious businessmen of *haryqa* and *hamidiyya*, the main business center in downtown Damascus), their longstanding social foundation, to fund their charitable networks that functioned mostly in Damascus and some of its suburbs. The main mission of such networks was to distribute humanitarian aid to those affected by the crisis, for example funding families of detainees and housing internal refugees. A 26-year-old activist affiliated with Rifai assured the author that, during the early months of the uprising, businessmen of *hamidiyya* held weekly meetings with Rifai in which they “collected money for humanitarian aid and for revolutionary ends”.<sup>122</sup> Although, after some six months of the uprising, Rifai and Rajih fled to Turkey. Nevertheless, they managed to maintain their contact channels with followers in Damascus, mainly with activists in *kafruseh* and *midan*. According to an anti-Assad activist in *Kafruseh*:

“We are in contact with Rifai. Via telephone, Skype and via Syrian activists in Istanbul, we chat about revolutionary affairs. We report the latest to him, and he gives us his thoughts, which we certainly took into account”.<sup>123</sup>

In this context, Rifai and Rajih utilised social media to promote their logic, and their sermons and interviews were regularly posted on the Facebook pages of the *kafruseh* and *midan* Revolutionary

<sup>120</sup>“mudakhalt al-shikh Usama Rifai ‘ala qanat oreiyyant”, (‘Interview with Usama Rifai on Orient Satellite TV station’), YouTube, accessed on 28/3/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCKjdMz8lYk>,

<sup>121</sup>“al-jazeera: muqabala m’ al-shikh Usama Rifai”, (Interview with Sheikh Usama Rifai on *al Jazeera*), 29/12/2012. Accessed on 4/5/2013, available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5ZU\\_IBvNn8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5ZU_IBvNn8)

<sup>122</sup>Author’s interview with Mahmoud in Damascus, 1/4/2012.

<sup>123</sup>Author’s interview with an anonymous Sunni rebel via Skype, 10/3/2013.

Committees. Yet, unlike Salafis, these Sufi clerics rarely appeared on Satellite TV Channels. Besides, although Rifai and Rajih have openly supported *jihad* and called on all Syrians to fight the Assad regime, neither of them established or funded any militias.<sup>124</sup> Notwithstanding, some of their followers - mainly youths of kafruseh and midan - took up arms, fighting either individually or under the umbrella of the FSA.

### 2.2.1. *The Salafi identity:*

Salafism is a strict form of Sunni Islam that seeks to revive *al-salaf al-salih*, a pure and authentic form of Islam. It aims to restructure the state and society in line with Quranic and Sharia law. Salafism is hostile “towards other Islamic teachings like Sufism and Shia Islam”.<sup>125</sup> As has been argued in chapter two, Salafism (unlike Sufism) has a legacy of being suppressed. However, Assad’s attempts to upgrade the authoritarian regime catalysed the revival of Salafism. Seemingly, the uprising accelerated this revival and set Salafis on a quest for power and legitimacy. Among the Salafi Sheikhs, the most noticeable in the Damascus suburbs were Sheikh Zahran ‘alloush and Sheikh ‘adnan ‘ar’our. These Sheikhs strove to reproduce Sunni identity in accordance with Salafi principles, which are hostile to Alawites, whom Salafis regularly dub as *kuffar* (‘atheists’). Chiefly, both Salafi Sheikhs advocated the transformation of Syria into *dawla Islamiyya*, an Islamic state. According to their rhetoric, this transformation could be effected by *Jihad*. However, these Sheikhs confined their interest in *Jihad* to Syrian politics as, unlike the Salafi-Jihadis, they did not refer to *Jihad* as a global holy war.<sup>126</sup> Importantly, these Salafi sheikhs established a social contract with the rural middle-class, a social strata that was more frequently subjected to the regime’s bombardments than the urban class. By focusing on the activities of ‘ar’our and ‘alloush, the following section gives an analysis of the Salafi attempts to reproduce a particular version of Sunni identity.

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<sup>124</sup> In one of his sermons, Rajih called on “each Syrian to undertake jihad for the sake of God”. See “Sheikh Kraiyyim Rajih: ‘ala kul shab yaqwl ana souriyy ‘n y’wd l souriyya l yujahid wa yusharyk fi al-thawra”, (Sheikh Kraiyyim Rajih: each guy who refers to himself as Syrian should go back to Syria for Jihad and to take part in the revolution”, YouTube, accessed on 7/5/2013, available at : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5Oh7kqesc0>

<sup>125</sup> Aron Lund “Syria’s Salafi insurgents: The Rise of The Syrian Islamic Front”, ( UI Occasional papers #17 March 2013 Published by the Swedish institute of International Affairs). p5.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. p.14.

‘Adnan ‘ar‘our (b. 1948) fled his hometown of Hama to Saudi Arabia in 1982, owing to the regime’s oppression of Hama’s Islamist rebellion. During the 2011 uprising, ‘ar‘our emerged as a symbolic figure, and styled himself as its godfather. Mainly, his discourse portrayed the uprising as a Sunni movement that sought to achieve religious aims, rather than a popular movement that had its roots in a secular ideology of freedom and democracy. In short, ‘ar‘our sought to reinforce the Salafi identity by making use of material structure (such as the media and the paramilitary wing) and Salafi symbols (such as the Salafi flag and myths). He regularly appeared on the Salafi Satellite TV Channels *wisal* and *shada al-hurriya*. During his television appearances, ‘ar‘our made anti-Alawite speeches in which he cited Salafi theorists and made rhetorical use of symbols from the Salafi tradition, particularly the Salafi flag. In December 2012, for example, ‘ar‘our appeared on *shada al-hurriya* calling on Syrians to write *Allah Akbar* (‘God is Great’) across the center of the revolutionary flag, and to denounce any Syrian who opposed this action as *zandyq*, ‘a non-believer’. Interestingly, his calls ignited a wave of anger among anti-Assad secularists, who launched a Facebook campaign in response, entitled *ana zandyq*, ‘I am a non-believer’.<sup>127</sup> Moreover, in a live aired program on *wisal*, ‘ar‘our explicitly threatened to execute each Alawite who supported Assad, saying that:

“I swear to God that we would grind the flesh of pro-regime Alawites and feed it to the dogs”.<sup>128</sup>

Footage of ‘ar‘our shaking a warning finger at the camera while vowing to kill pro-regime Alawites spread throughout the online community. Unsurprisingly, this only acted as fuel to the fire of sectarianism. His statement also fragmented the Sunni opposition, with some Sunnis praising his vows and others strongly rejecting them. In late 2012, ‘ar‘our launched ‘with Syria until victory’, a 120-minute weekly program on the *shada al-hurriyya* TV station, in which he discusses religious and revolutionary affairs from a Salafi perspective. In conjunction with his TV

<sup>127</sup>“al-da’iyah al-‘ar‘our : kul mn la yarf” kalimit allahu akbar hw zandyq”, (‘ar‘our : whomsoever does not acknowledge the word of Allah Akbar is a Zandyq’), YouTube, accessed on 28/3/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6SxxuM9gBc>

<sup>128</sup>“al-‘ar‘our sayafrum al-alawiyyin bil mulinkis w yut’im lahmahum lil kelab”, (‘ar‘our will grind the Alawites by mulliniks and will feed their meat to dogs’), YouTube, accessed on 3/5/2013, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbkDiWZh2fI>. Also see “The Charm of Telesalafism” The Economist Website, accessed on 3/5/2013, available at: <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21564913-influential-rebel-preacher-who-needs-tone-things-down>



program, 'ar'our manipulated social media to reinforce his doctrines, and at the time of writing has more than a million followers on Twitter and some 238,200 on his Facebook page.<sup>129</sup> According to sources on the ground, 'ar'our is supported by state and non-state actors. He has secured funds via Salafi networks in Saudi Arabia, while the Saudi Kingdom continues to provide him with logistic and political support.<sup>130</sup> 'Ar'our funded militias and charity networks that operate mainly in the suburbs of Damascus, particularly with the al-Sahaba militias in the lawan area.<sup>131</sup> However, his strongest foothold is reportedly in the suburbs of Hama.

The second Salafi actor whose power is flourishing at the time of writing is Sheikh Zahran 'alloush, the leader of *Liwa' al-Islam* ('the Islam Brigade'), the strongest brigade operating in the periphery of Damascus. *Liwa' al-Islam* is funded by a Salafi lobby in the Gulf States and Iraq. 'Alloush (who holds a post-graduate degree in Islamic studies from the Islamic University of Saudi Arabia) is a former Islamist prisoner, whom the Syrian regime set free in the early months of the uprising. Hereafter, he established a base in his hometown of Duma, northern Damascus.<sup>132</sup> 'Alloush used a hostile rhetoric towards Alawites, describing them as *kuffar* atheists and portraying the uprising as a holy war against the Alawites. For example, during a graduation ceremony for Islam Brigade fighters, 'alloush stressed that the motivations for the uprising must be purely religious, stating that:

“[We] are going to take up arms and to raise our flag [the Salafi flag] to fight for the sake of God and to destroy the *Kufr* ' (atheism') and the *Kuffar* [referring to Alawites]”.<sup>133</sup>

Moreover, 'alloush, rarely voiced the word 'revolution' or 'uprising'. Instead, he applied sectarian language and Salafi terminology, such as *jihad* and *ghazu* ('struggle' and 'invasion',

<sup>129</sup> See 'ar'our page on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/AdnanAlarour> and Twitter <https://twitter.com/AdnanAlarour> accessed 5/11/2013.

<sup>130</sup> ICG August 2012, p.21

<sup>131</sup> Lawan or Bassatyyn al-Lawan is located at the edges of western Damascus. Author's interview with Kinan 21/3/2012.

<sup>132</sup> Ibrahim Hamidi "kata'ib Islamiyya souriyya tatawahad bi da'm iqlimy istibaqan li hal syasy", ('Syrian Islamist militias unit in an anticipation of a political solution'), *Alhayat* (6/10/2013).

<sup>133</sup> "tadrybat wa takhrij duf'ah men abtal liwa' al-islam" ('exercises and graduation of the heroes of al-Islam Brigade'), YouTube, accessed on 6/10/2013 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPT0rx1CTwA>



respectively).<sup>134</sup> For instance, in his official page on Twitter, ‘alloush accused Alawites of plotting “to massacre the Sunni people”’.<sup>135</sup> In this light, he utilised communication tools to reinforce Salafi identity. Unlike ‘ar‘our, however, he eschewed Salafi TV stations, preferring instead to appear on his group’s channels on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. In addition to posting details of its military operations and ceremonies, the group channel also uploaded statements by its leader.<sup>136</sup> In February 2013, the Islam Brigade issued a weekly magazine dubbed *nida’ al-Islam* (‘Islam’s call’) that focused mainly on the Brigade’s news. This eight-page magazine employed Salafi rhetoric by constantly referring to Islam Brigade fighters as *mujahidiyyin*, an Islamic term for ‘strugglers’ or ‘warriors’.<sup>137</sup> Moreover, in a column entitled ‘a whisper in *mujahid*’s ear’, the paper published articles that discussed religious affairs from a Salafi logic. One case in point is an article entitled ‘obedience’, which stressed one’s religious obligation to obey one’s leaders in the battlefield and to obey *wlat al-‘umwr* (‘the guardians’). The term ‘guardians’ is only vaguely defined by the newspaper, however.<sup>138</sup>

Notably, the Islam Brigade’s biggest stronghold is in Duma, and its followers there are largely devout, lower middle-class Sunnis. According to observers, ‘alloush has established a quasi-Salafi state in Duma and its surrounding suburbs.<sup>139</sup> However, *Liwa’ al-Islam*’s influence seems to have spread beyond Duma, as the Brigade has collaborated with militias operating in the suburbs of other towns, such as Sinjar town in Idlib in northwest Syria. Muhannad, a 32-year-old commander of the Sinjar Martyrs’ Militia, assured the author that his militia was building a productive alliance with Islam Brigade, claiming that:

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<sup>134</sup>See *ibid*, where ‘alloush voiced the word *Jihad* in reference to the uprising, and also referred to anti-Assad fighters as *mujahedeen*.

<sup>135</sup> Twitter 30 October 2012.

<sup>136</sup> See ‘alloush official page on Twitter accessed on 7/5/2013, available at <https://twitter.com/zahran1970>. Also see the Video Channel of the Brigade on YouTube, accessed on 5/5/2013, available at <https://www.youtube.com/feed/UCUOrgRv4lOuwKkTltbHR9rA>, and see the Facebook page for the Islam Brigade on <https://www.facebook.com/#!/liwaa.Al.Islam.02?fref=ts> accessed on 4/5/2013

<sup>137</sup> Online Issues of this magazine are available at <http://issuu.com/islambrigade>. Accessed on 5/8/2013.

<sup>138</sup>“Hamsa fi ‘azn mujaheed”, (‘a whisper in mujaheed’s ear’), *nida al-Islam* website, accessed on 1/4/2013, available at <http://issuu.com/islambrigade/docs/nidaa.islam-3>

<sup>139</sup> Author’s interview with a former soldier of *Liwa’ el Islam* 16/12/ 2012, via Skype.

“Our collaboration with *Liwa’ al-Islam* had fruitful implications for both of us. They [Islam Brigade’s fighters] are good Muslims and they are very similar to us”.<sup>140</sup>

Consequently, ‘alloush’s agenda is not limited to the suburbs of Damascus, but seems to have stretched to the rural areas of other cities. In parallel, ‘alloush is the director of a powerful network of charities that function in the suburbs of Damascus and other towns (like Sinjar). This network provides fighters’ families with aid, such as food baskets, medicine and cash. Moreover, ‘alloush funded educational institutions and religious institutions that teach Salafi doctrines in Duma.<sup>141</sup>

### 2.2.2. *The Salafi-Jihadi identity:*

Salafi-Jihadism is the fundamentalist trend of Salafism that seeks to enforce Islamic order by using arms, and which vehemently rejects any secular ideology like democracy and nationalism.<sup>142</sup> As specialists have observed, the number of Salafi-Jihadi groups mushroomed during the uprising. During the first two years of the uprising, the most powerful of these is *jabhit al-nusra*, or the Nusra Front (NF), formed in January 2012 and which, according to observers, is a paramilitary organisation with links to al-Qaeda.<sup>143</sup> Militarily and logistically speaking, the NF is the solidest militia operating in Syria, the identities of its leaders and benefactors remain a mystery.<sup>144</sup> It has a strong footing in northern Syria, particularly in Idlib and Aleppo, but it also operates in Damascus and its suburbs.<sup>145</sup> The NF adopted an anti-secular agenda that strove for the establishment of *al-khilafa al-Islamiyya*, or Islamic caliphate. Most importantly, unlike the *jihad* of the Salafis, it advocated a global approach to *jihad*. Since for the NF’s fighters, *jihad* is not limited to the fight against the Assad regime but extends to the global struggle against non-Muslims, imperialism and the west. The NF declared its formation on 24 January 2012 with a video clip uploaded to

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<sup>140</sup> Author’s interview with Muhannad al-‘arian 15/2/2013, via Skype.

<sup>141</sup> Fieldwork, Duma, September 2012.

<sup>142</sup> Aron Luand. *op.cit.*

<sup>143</sup> “Tentative Jihad: Syria’s Fundamentalists Opposition”, International Crisis Group ICG N131-12 (October 2012), p. 10.

<sup>144</sup> Noman Benotman and Roisin Blake “Jabhat al-Nusra : A Strategic Briefing”, Quilliam Foundation (January 2013) available on <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/jabhat-al-nusra-a-strategic-briefing.pdf>, accessed on 28/3/2013

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

YouTube, in which the NF stated its ultimate objective of “bringing the law of *Allah* back to his land”.<sup>146</sup> Essentially, the NF portrayed the Syrian uprising as a religious struggle against the Alawites and the Shiites, while strongly denouncing any secular motivations, or drives arising from national affiliation. Reportedly, the NF comprised both Syrian and foreign fighters - mainly Iraqis, Afghanis and Libyans - who flocked into Syria to participate in the holy *jiḥād*.<sup>147</sup> The Syrian fighters mostly came from lower-classes in the remote areas, such as the town of Binish, north of Idlib, and al-hajr al-`aswad, south of Damascus. According to reliable sources on the ground, most of the NF’s Syrian fighters were uneducated and unemployed young men (aged between 16 and 35) who had been dispossessed prior to the uprising and suppressed during it. As a result, their association with the NF allowed them to feel empowered.<sup>148</sup> Furthermore, the NF deployed strategies for building a supportive base among the populace, such as distributing humanitarian aids in the areas in which it operated. Also, the NF utilised online social media to spread its rhetoric by uploading videos detailing its operations and policies.<sup>149</sup> Despite fighting under its banner, not all of the NF’s Syrian members agreed with these policies; they were less captivated by the NF’s Jihadi ideology than by the efficiency of its military operations. As a FSA soldier who was fighting with the NF stated:

“NF is an extremely professional paramilitary, it hits the regime in the eyes. I do not agree with their agenda or with their sectarian logic, but I want to get rid of Assad. Thus, I’m ready to collaborate with the devil to achieve this end”.<sup>150</sup>

#### Summary:

Based on the above account, it seems that during the uprising, anti-Assad political entrepreneurs of Sufism, Salafism and Salafi-Jihadism were competing to gain a hegemonic position in post-Assad Syria. Each of them strove to reproduce a specific version of Sunni identity that would provide him with power and legitimacy. Although the versions of Sunni identity that they were

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<sup>146</sup> “al-i’alan an jabhet al-nasra” (Declaration of the Nusra front), YouTube, accessed on 2/5/2013, Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fuh1cl9vIR0>,. See also Noman Benotman and Roisin Blake *op.cit.*, p, 13.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid

<sup>148</sup> Author’s interview with an international reporter who spent several months in Aleppo and Idlib, which are deemed to be strongholds of the NF. The interview was conducted on 5/5/2013 via email.

<sup>149</sup> See the NF’s Website on <http://www.as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=77396>, , accessed on 3/5/2013.

<sup>150</sup> Author’s Interview via Skype with an anonymous FSA soldier, 1/2/2013.

attempting to reproduce vary from moderate to extreme, all of them employed a sectarian discourse that prioritised explicit adherence to Sunnism, thus helping to incite identity clashes with the Alawites. Each of these actors concocted strategies for mobilising his followers and for asserting his power over the others. Each strategy, however, was determined by geographic and socio-economic factors. Sufism, for example, seem sought to assert a modest Sunni identity that acknowledged the norms of democracy whilst remaining under the Sunni umbrella. However passively, it still embodied the predominance of Sunni identity and accentuated the line between Sunnis and Alawites. On the one hand, the Sufis managed to consolidate their power among the urban elite and middle-classes, their longstanding allies. Nevertheless, their foothold is fragile in comparison with that of the Salafis, as they lack the economic, political and military support that the Salafis have secured. On the other hand, Salafis and Salafi-Jihadis strive to reproduce a fundamentalist Sunni identity that ignores all secular ideologies like nationalism, and which directs a bellicose rhetoric towards the Alawites. Salafis are considered to be more moderate than Salafi-Jihadis, as the Salafi agenda confines itself to the political sphere within the territorial state, whereas the Salafi-Jihadis advocate global *jihad*. Nevertheless, during the uprising it seemed that both groups established a relatively solid footing, with both managing to obtain grassroots support, money and military leverage. In this light, Salafis succeeded in mobilising the rural middle-classes while the Salafi-Jihadis effectively mobilised the lower-classes in rural and remote areas. Interestingly, some forty years ago, these strata had formed the supportive base for the secular Ba'ath party. Thanks to Bashar Assad's economic project that turned them from being supporters of secular ideology to advocates of Salafism and Jihadism. However, the repercussions of Bashar's policies also interact with a legacy of hatreds towards the Alawites and the Damascene Sufis, since the latter is comprised of the urban bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, it is safe to presume that the Salafi-Jihadis' chances of achieving hegemony are limited, as most of Syrian Sunnis tend to reject the extremist version of Islamic caliphate, which they perceive to be inapplicable. Consequently, Salafism is emerging as a powerful candidate for the support of the rural areas. Many rural, middle and lower-class Sunnis perceive Salafism as a legitimate presence that fights on the battlefield. By contrast, the legitimacy of Sufism is questionable, as it does not have a military presence. Rather, Sufis have a record of association with Assad prior to and during the uprising. Most importantly, Salafism seems to pave the way for rural Sunnis to enter Syria's political theatre, which in the pre-Ba'ath decade was monopolised by the urban Sunnis, such as

the Attasis of Homs and the Quatlis of Damascus. In the Ba'athist republic, Syrian politics was dominated by minority groups, mainly the Alawites, Druze and Ismail'is. Although many rural Sunnis were empowered by the Ba'athist system during Hafez Assad's tenure, only a few of them acquired high-rank positions in the Ba'ath apparatus. Among these were the former Defense Minister Mustafa Tllas and the former Vice President Abdul-Halim Khaddam. Under Bashar Assad, however, powerful rural Ba'athists were marginalised. As a result, the key political positions were limited to Alawites, and urban Sufis dominated the religious theatre.

### *1.3 The Shi'ite axis vs. the Sunni bloc: reproducing Sunni and Alawite identities from beyond the Syrian borders:*

Given Syria's geostrategic position and her potential as a regional actor, it is unsurprising that the repercussions of the uprising reach beyond the borders of the Syrian territories. A radical change in Damascus would catalyse a drastic shift in the balance of the regional system and jeopardise the stability of all contiguous actors. Therefore, since the onset of the uprising regional actors have been striving to minimise the risks while seeking out *realpolitik* gains. Both the Sunni and the Alawite identity acted as vital instruments in the hands of regional actors vying for power. Unquestionably, this helped to inflame identity clashes. The policies of the so-called 'Shiite axis' (comprised of Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah) and those of the 'Sunni-bloc' (represented mainly by some Gulf States and Turkey) manipulated sectarian identities in order to advance their interests. Each

player sought to empower an identity group over the others by advancing political, economic and military support. This gave a sectarian trajectory to the Syrian uprising, and characterised it as a Sunni versus Shiite holy struggle. The first part of this section examines the effects of the rhetoric employed by Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah while the second part assesses the role of non-Syrian, Sunni political entrepreneurs who, supported by the Sunni bloc, helped to incite identity clashes from above.

In essence, the intimate involvement of Iran and Hezbollah had been acknowledged since the very beginning of the uprising, as both actors have openly and fervently backed the Syrian regime. Nevertheless, it is beyond the scope of this section to examine whether their motivations have ideological roots or are limited to *realpolitik* ends. Certainly, the Syrian regime's survival is critical to Iran's power and, moreover, to Hezbollah's *de facto* existence. This is owing to the fact that Syria has long been a potent ally for both actors, as well as a conduit for providing weapons to Hezbollah. Therefore, Iran and Hezbollah struggled to defend their embroiled ally, and supplied the Assad regime with comprehensive political and military support. Furthermore, Hezbollah and Iranian fighters were shadowing the regime's forces in some sectarian mixed areas, mainly in the suburbs of Homs, which fueled the Sunni versus Alawite identity clashes.<sup>151</sup> This led to the FSA's capture in August 2012 of 48 Iranians who, according to the Syrian opposition, were members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Meanwhile, Iranian official sources claimed that these were pious Shiite pilgrims. This kidnapping incident heightened the sectarian tensions, as it positioned Shiite and Alawite identity at the odds with Sunni identity. Many anti-Assad Sunnis interviewed by the author portrayed these Iranian hostages as representatives of Alawite identity seeking to dominate the Sunni identity. Abdullah, an anti-Assad Sunni of Homs, summarises this perspective as follow:

"These Iranians are Shiite fighters, they are representing a Shiite theocracy allied to an Alawite regime. They came to Syria in order to empower their Alawite allies and to weaken the Sunnis".<sup>152</sup> In January 2013, the Iranian detainees were released under a Turkish-sponsored deal, by which the

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<sup>151</sup>Masih Alinejad and Azadeh Moaveni "Assad's big Ally: How deeply entrenched is Iran in Syria?", *The Times*, accessed on 6/5/2013. See also Josh Wood "Hezbollah Offering direct help to Syrian army, Rebel Say", *New York Time* (17/10/2012).

<sup>152</sup>Author's interview with Abdullah 6/8/2012, Damascus.

Syrian regime freed some 2000 anti-Assad protesters.<sup>153</sup> The Syrian State TV broadcasted footage of Iranian officials in Damascus giving a heroic welcome to the released hostages. In the eyes of many Syrian Sunnis, this cast doubt on the fact that these Iranians were ordinary pilgrims, thus emphasising the sectarian nature of the kidnapping.

In a similar vein, Mehdi Taeb, a Senior Iranian cleric, inflamed sectarian resentment in February 2013 by declaring Syria as an essential province of Iran:

“Syria is the 35th province [of Iran] and a strategic province for us. If the enemy attacks us and wants to take either Syria or Khuzestan [in western Iran], the priority for us is to keep Syria. If we keep Syria, we can get Khuzestan back too; but if we lose Syria, we cannot keep Tehran”.<sup>154</sup>

Taeb’s statement dominated the news bulletins and fueled the Alawite versus Sunni identity clashes, since it was perceived by many Sunnis as a clear indicator of the “Shiite-Alawite alliance against the Sunnis”.<sup>155</sup> For many Alawites, on the other hand, this statement strengthened their stance in relation to the Sunnis. According to Aseel, a 26 year-old Alawite of Damascus:

“Taeb’s declaration assures that they will defend us against them until the end”.<sup>156</sup>

Paralleling Iran’s rhetoric is the official discourse by Hezbollah leader, Hasan Nassrallah. His discourse seems to have intensified the identity clashes as, since the beginning of the uprising, he has expressed a steadfast commitment to the Syrian regime and portrayed the popular movement as a conspiracy against the so called ‘resistance axis’.<sup>157</sup> Although Nassrallah denied there being

<sup>153</sup> “Pilgrims or mercenaries? Iran asks Turkey and Qatar for help in freeing captured nationals in Syria”, RT website, accessed on 14/3/2013, available at: <http://rt.com/news/syria-kidnap-damascus-iranian-pilgrims-872/>. See also “Syrian government free 2130 prisoners in exchange for 48 Iranians”, CNN website, accessed on 6/5/2013, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/01/09/world/meast/syria-prisoner-exchange>. Also see the video uploaded by rebels on YouTube that shows the Iranian hostages : “al-jaysh al-souriyy al-hur y’sur 48 shabih irani la’yn” (‘Syrian Free Army arrest 48 cursed Iranian Shabih in Syria’), YouTube, accessed on 14/3/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fZQnVcqT7k>.

<sup>154</sup> “Iranian cleric: losing Syria is like losing Tehran”, YALIBAN website, accessed on 29/3/2013, available at: <http://www.yalibnan.com/2013/02/16/iranian-cleric-losing-syria-is-like-losing-tehran/>. See also Tareq al-Hashemi, “if we lose Syria we lose Tehran”, *asharq al-aawsat* (17/2/2013)

<sup>155</sup> Author’s interview with an anonymous Sunni of Damascus 18/2/2013 Skype.

<sup>156</sup> Author’s interview with Aseel 20/2/2013, via Skype.

<sup>157</sup> Mona Yaccobian “Regional Dynamics of Syria’s uprising the impact on Lebanon and Hezbollah” (United States Institutes of Peace No: 107, October 2011), available at <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/PB%20107.pdf>, accessed on 5/5/2013.

any physical presence of his party in Syria during the first two years of the uprising, nevertheless, he declared that Syrian Shiites in villages on the border with Lebanon “took up arms to protect themselves from the armed-gangs there [in reference to the Sunni militias]”.<sup>158</sup> With this statement, Nassrallah voiced Hezbollah’s solidarity with the Shiite identity in its struggle against the Sunni identity, hence accelerating the sectarian narrative. Notably, Nassrallah’s approach towards the uprising resulted in a radical decline in his popularity among most Syrians, who for two decades had regarded Nassrallah as a national hero. Yet, during the uprising, the cross-sectarian legitimacy that Nassrallah once used to enjoy was destroyed, and his status as a national hero turned to that of a Shiite enemy.<sup>159</sup> As a Sunni resident of Damascus expressed:

“Nassrallah is backing Assad because a Shiite would support an Alawite and not a Sunni. Resistance is only a cover for Hezbollah sectarian ends”.<sup>160</sup>

In this context, the discourse of the Iraqi Prime Minister, Noury Maliki, seems to overlap with Iran and Hezbollah’s approaches toward the uprising. In the eruption of the uprising, Maliki expressed his vocal support for the Syrian regime. As he belongs to the Shiite identity group and is the leader of a government that is considered to be part of the Shiite axis, Maliki’s stances were framed in a Shiite and Alawite versus Sunni perspective. Moreover, in a controversial statement, Maliki emphasised the sectarian nature of the uprising that, in his words, forced the Alawites in Syria to fight “bravely by their men and by their women in order to survive”.<sup>161</sup> Certainly, such a commentary indicated the sectarian grounding of Maliki’s attitudes towards the uprising, and heightened the tension between Alawites and Sunnis by reproducing the Alawite identity as an endangered species fighting for its survival. Besides, although Maliki opted not to intervene militarily in Syria, the Iraqi forces at the border areas provided a defensive cover for the Syrian regime. For example, in the early months of 2013, sporadic clashes were reported to have occurred

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<sup>158</sup> “Statement of Hezbollah Chief, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah” Lebanonfile website, accessed on 13/3/2013, available at: <http://lebanonfiles.com/news/511529>.

<sup>159</sup> Anne Barnard “Loyalty to Syrian President Could Isolate Hezbollah”, *New York Time Newspaper*, (5/4/2012).

<sup>160</sup> Authors’ interview with Maram in Damascus 10/3/ 2012.

<sup>161</sup> “al-maliki; al-alwiyyin fi souriyya yuqatiloun bi shaja’it al ya’s” (‘Maliki: Alawites in Syria are fighting with the courage of despair’), Alarabiya website, accessed on 29/3/2013, available at : <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/02/09/265327.html>



between anti-Assad militants and the Iraqi troops safeguarding Assad's forces.<sup>162</sup> Notably, sectarian tension extended to the fragile Iraq in late 2012, when Iraq's Shiite-led government faced several protests from Sunnis angered by perceived discrimination. The protests erupted from the Sunni stronghold of Falluja and rapidly spread to other Sunni Arab areas of Iraq.<sup>163</sup> Some Syrian Sunni rebels praised these 'anti-Shiite' demonstrations in Iraq and linked them to the Syrian uprising. For instance, anti-Assad activists proposed *Souriyya wa al-Iraq: thawra tutfi' nar al-majows* ('Syria and Iraq: a revolution that will quench the fire of the Magi' [in reference to the Shiites and to the Alawites]) as the title for the 8<sup>th</sup> of March protest in Syria.<sup>164</sup> Certainly, such affiliation projected the uprising as a Sunni war against the Alawites and the Shiites. Moreover, in late 2012, Lebanese and Iraqi Shiite soldiers co-founded *abu al-fadil al-abbas*, a brigade for protecting the Shiite holy Shrine of *Saiyyda Zainab* on the edges of Damascus against a possible attack from "Sunni rebels".<sup>165</sup> Sources on the ground assured that, although the brigade is supervised by Hezbollah commanders, it is also comprised of Lebanese and Iraqi Shiite soldiers. The Brigade has a page on Facebook, which issued the identity of its non-Syrian killed soldiers and uploaded videos of its fighters chanting Shiite slogans and vowing to attack the anti-Assad Sunnis.<sup>166</sup> Regardless of the authenticity of such videos, they contributed significantly to inciting identity clashes and providing anti-Assad Sunni political entrepreneurs with a further tool for effecting radicalisation.

On the other hand, political, economic and militarily support given to the Syrian Sunni rebels by Turkey and some of the Gulf states heightened the sectarian narrative and seemed to instigate identity clashes, since their involvement was portrayed as part of a broader struggle against the Shiite axis in the region. In fact, each of these players exploited Sunni identity by empowering

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<sup>162</sup>"Officials: 42 Syrian troops ambushed in Iraq", CBS news website, accessed on 28/3/2013, available at: [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202\\_162-57572365/officials-42-syrian-troops-ambushed-in-iraq/](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202_162-57572365/officials-42-syrian-troops-ambushed-in-iraq/)

<sup>163</sup> Marisa Sullivan and Omar Abdullah "Largest Turnout of Sunni Protesters in Iraq Since Crisis Began" ( a study presented at the institute for the study of war No. #5a). Available at <http://www.understandingwar.org/weekly-iraq-update>

<sup>164</sup> This sparked a heated debate among secular activists who opposed the sectarian discourse endorsed by the Syrian Revolution Page on Facebook. In response, some secular activists created a page on Facebook to refute this proposed name for Friday's protest. See "no for the name of Friday's protest", Facebook, accessed on 3/11/2013, available at <https://www.facebook.com/naralmjoss>. Eventually, the Friday was not given this name, but was named 'Syrian women' instead, as March 8<sup>th</sup> marks the international women's day.

<sup>165</sup>"Shi'ite fighters rally to defend Damascus shrines", Reuters Website , accessed on 5/5/2013, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/03/us-syria-crisis-shiites-idUSBRE92202X20130303>

<sup>166</sup> See the Abu al-fadil al-abbas Brigade's page on Facebook at: <https://www.facebook.com/lowa.alabbas.yaali> , accessed on 3/11/2013.

Sunni-dominated factions of the opposition against pro-Assad forces dominated by Alawites and supported by the Shiite axis. Equally important is the media coverage of the Gulf States, such as *Al-Jazeera* Satellite TV network in Qatar and the *Al-Arabiya* Satellite TV network in Saudi Arabia. These networks broadcast this sectarian logic and henceforth played integral roles in reproducing sectarian identities.<sup>167</sup> In parallel, non-Syrian Salafi Sheikhs who were supported by some Gulf States played crucial roles in triggering identity clashes, since they characterised the uprising as an anti-Alawite and anti-Shiite movement. Some examples of these Sheikhs are:

*A. Sheikh Ahmed Asyr of Lebanon:*

A Salafi cleric based in Sidon in southern Lebanon, he emerged during the Syrian uprising as a problematic figure who endorsed anti-Shiite and anti-Alawite logic. In his discourse, Asyr described the uprising as a fight for “existence”<sup>168</sup> between the Shiites and the Sunnis in the region. He organised a myriad of anti-Assad rallies in Sunni areas of Lebanon, where he frequently delivered rabblousing statements. For instance, in one of his speeches, Asyr accused Hezbollah of attacking Sunnis in Syria:

“Hezbollah is sending his soldiers to kill our [Sunnis] siblings and to rape our women”.<sup>169</sup>

In essence, Asyr strove to link the uprising in Syria with his struggle against Hezbollah control over Lebanon. Hence, his speeches and statements stressed that Syrian rebels were fighting against the Alawite and Shiite hegemony in Syria and Lebanon. For example, in a televised interview, Asyr warned Nassrallah that Sunnis of Syria and Lebanon would “redress the power balance in Lebanon”.<sup>170</sup> Notably, Asyr’s speeches and sermons were aired live by some Lebanese TV channels, and were uploaded to a website sponsored by him. Indeed, Asyr gained momentum among some anti-Assad Syrian Sunnis, who circulated his commentaries on social networks.

<sup>167</sup> Kessler, Oren “The two faces of Al-Jazeera”, *Middle East Quarterly* (Winter 2012), pp. 47-56 .

<sup>168</sup> “al-shikh al-asyr yatahim mubashara al-assad, nasrallah w khamiyna’y” (‘Sheikh Asyr is directly accusing Nasrallah, Assad and Khamenei’), YouTube, accessed on 3/11/2013, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mXThorek26M>

<sup>169</sup> “al-shikh al-asyr: Hezbollah yaqtul wa yaghtasib ‘ahlana fiy souriyya” (‘al-Sheikh Asyr: Hezbollah is killing and raping our siblings in Syria’), YouTube, accessed on 3/11/2013, available at : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wa5A4D223M>

<sup>170</sup> “al-asyr: tawylah ‘ala raqbatak w raqbit iran” (‘Asyr: It is taller than your neck and that of Iran’), YouTube, accessed on 13/3/2013, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNVhQIxQGS4>.

Furthermore, as a gesture for appreciation, Syrian Sunni rebels named a militia after him.<sup>171</sup> It is also worth noting that Asyr is funded by Salafi networks based in Lebanon and in Saudi Arabia. He also runs a charity network that supplies humanitarian aid to Syrian Sunnis who took refuge in Lebanon, and that supplied light weaponry to Sunni militants in the suburbs of Homs.<sup>172</sup>

*B. Nabil al-‘audy of Kuwait:*

Al-‘audy is a charismatic Salafi cleric, who regularly appeared on Salafi TV Channels while accusing the Assad regime of targeting the Sunni community in Syria. He used sectarian language in which he often cited Ibn Taimiyya, a medieval scholar (d. 1328) who issued the controversial declaration that Alawites are *murtadon* (‘apostates’).<sup>173</sup> In one of his sermons, al-‘audy accused Iran and Hezbollah of causing the violence in Syria, and went on to call on the leaders of the Gulf States to arm anti-Assad Sunnis:

“Those who fight in Syria are the party of devil [referring to Hezbollah], and the militias of Mahdi. Iran is fighting against us [Sunnis] so either you [Gulf Leaders] send your armies [to Syria], or you should arm the FSA. Otherwise, all of you are traitors”.<sup>174</sup>

Chiefly, al-‘audy projected the Syrian uprising as a holy war against the Shiite threat. In a televised sermon, he praised Syrian Sunni militants for confronting the Shiite agenda:

“Syrian Sunni rebels are facing the biggest and the most dangerous project to the Islamic Uma [which is] the project of Safavid [in reference to Shiites]”.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> “katybat al-sheik ahmad al-asyr tabi’a li-shuhada souriyya, jabal al-zawiya”, (‘Ahmed Asyr militia is linked to Syria’s martyrdom in Jabal el Zawiya’), YouTube, accessed on 13/3/2013, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRZMNq761H8>

<sup>172</sup> Author’s interview with an anonymous Sunni activist associated with Asyr on 9/1/2013, Lebanon.

<sup>173</sup> Nibras Kazimi *Syria: Through Jihadist eyes; a perfect enemy* (USA: Hoover Institution Press Publication: 2010), p. 19.

<sup>174</sup> “kalam qawy min nabiyl al-‘audy ‘an souriyya wa iran wa al hukkam al-arab”, (‘Tough words from Nabil al-‘audy on Syria, Iran and the Arab leaders’), YouTube, accessed on 13/3/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4IKyM6VMCE>.

<sup>175</sup> “khutbat abtal al-sham wa al-mashru’ al-safawi” (‘Sermon about the Damascene heroes and the Safavid project’), YouTube, accessed on 3/11/2013, available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0EE3SCkO64U&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0EE3SCkO64U&feature=youtube_gdata_player). The ‘Safavid project’ refers to

Remarkably, al-‘audy obtained a large following among some Syrian Sunni activists, who dedicated a Facebook page to him, dubbed ‘a million Syrians with the voice of justice: sheikh Mohamed al-‘audy’. Al-‘audy’s sermons and interviews were often posted on this page.<sup>176</sup> Moreover, he is the director of a charitable association funded by Salafi networks in Kuwait, the same association that supplied weapons to Sunni rebels in Syria and endowed Syrian refugees in Turkey with social services.<sup>177</sup>

*C. Mohamed al- ‘uraify of Saudi Arabia;*

Al-‘uraify is a Salafi preacher who hosts a popular 90-minute TV program entitled ‘put in your fingerprint’, which is broadcast on the Salafi TV channel *Iqra* ‘(read)’. In his broadcasts, he portrayed the Syrian uprising as a *jihad* against the Alawites and the Shiites.<sup>178</sup> Notably, he is based in the Saudi capital, from where he directs a charitable network that provided Sunni rebels with light weaponry. In addition, al-‘uraify distributed humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees, particularly in Jordan, which he visited several times to deliver sermons and cash money.<sup>179</sup> Indeed, al-‘uraify’s anti-Alawite rhetoric was admired by some Syrian Sunni rebels, who frequently circulated his statements on the social media.

Summary:

On the basis of the above account, it can be asserted that external actors played integral roles in constructing Sunni versus Alawite identity clashes from above. On the one hand, the vocal and visible support that the Shiite axis gave to the Syrian regime reproduced the Alawite identity and

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shi’ism. The Safavid dynasty of the 13<sup>th</sup> century ruled the Persian Empire and established the twelve Shia Islam as its official religion. Notably, this dynasty attempted to advance Shi’ism in the region by military means.

<sup>176</sup> See (‘million Syrian voice with Nabil al-‘audi’), Facebook, accessed on 3/11/2013, available at <https://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%AE-%D9%86%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%B6%D9%8A/255243627835418?fref=ts>

<sup>177</sup> See ICG October 2012, *op.cit*, p. 30

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> “da’ basmattak fi souriyya”, (‘Put your fingerprint on Syria’), YouTube, accessed on 29/3/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LL-Las3ltVs> . In this Video, ‘urifi distributes *Zaka* to Syrian refugees in Jordan.

triggered the subsequent backlash from the Sunnis. For many Sunnis, these actors were perceived as backing the Alawites against the Sunni rebels, since the fall of the Assad regime would fracture the Shiite axis and empower the Sunni bloc. As a result, these actors' intervention was placed in the broader picture of the struggle between Sunnis and Shiites for regional power. Consequently, this bolstered sectarian and transnational affiliations. On the other hand, the political, economic and military support that Sunni state actors gave to the Sunni rebels reinforced the Alawite identity and directed it against the Sunnis. From an Alawite perspective, these actors were striving to erode the Alawite identity and to make the Sunni identity dominant in the region. Moreover, the anti-Alawite discourse used by non-Syrian Sunni political entrepreneurs helped to incite identity clashes, as each of them sought to reinforce the Sunni identity against the Alawite identity. This characterised the struggle as being crucial to the survival of each identity group. Importantly, all these actors deployed material structures (by using charitable networks, media and arms), and symbolic factors (by citing from Ibn Taimiyya's texts and emphasising the importance of holy shrines), to reproduce identities and to steer the uprising in a more sectarian direction.

In sum, state and non-state external actors manipulated sectarian identities for their struggle *in and for* Syria. Despite being outsiders, they seem to be capable of redrawing the ethnic boundaries inside Syria. Their discourses played pivotal roles in prioritising sectarian sentiment over national affiliation and henceforth producing transnational affiliation by which a Syrian Sunni might associate his or her identity with a Saudi Sunni fighting against a Syrian Alawite. Equally, a Syrian Alawite may feel an affinity with a Shiite Lebanese fighting against a Syrian Sunni.

## **2. Sunni identity vs. Alawite identity: the reproduction from below:**

This section attempts to prove that identity clashes are not simply manufactured from above. Symbols and myths also operate at the grassroots level, and their symbolic power is unleashed when the *security dilemma* reaches a crisis. In this way, they are powerful to reproduce particular identity and to igniting identity clashes from below. Sectarian symbols, slogans, songs and jokes highlight the boundaries between 'us' and 'them', reinforcing identities and inciting clashes between identity groups. Throughout the uprising, several slogans chanted by Sunni rebels were

explicitly inciting identity clashes, since they conveyed anti-Alawite sentiment. The most controversial example is the Sunni vow to cleanse Syria of Alawites: *al-alwiyyah la al-qubour w al-masihyyyah la Beirut*, ‘Alawites to graves and Christians to Beirut’. Another similar example is *bidna nbyd al-alwiyyah*, ‘we want to massacre the Alawites’.<sup>180</sup> These slogans were sung by some anti-Assad Sunnis and began to be expressed around the fifth month of the uprising. Unsurprisingly, they elicited collective responses of anger and fear among the Alawites. An anti-Assad Alawite activist assured that this slogan was voiced during a protest in which she was taking part in the town of Yabroud, north of Damascus:

“We were chanting ‘the people want to overthrow the regime’, and then suddenly, couple of protesters yelled ‘we want to massacre the Alawites’. Rapidly, the rest of the protesters reiterated this slogan. I stood aside while watching the crowd. I felt afraid about my future and about Syria’s future”.<sup>181</sup>

Likewise, slogans that represent Alawite identity were often associated with Bashar Assad, as they vow loyalty to his cause. A widely repeated slogan says: *Shabiyyha lil abad la ‘ajl ‘aywnak ya Assad* ‘[we will remain] *Shabiyyha* forever, for your eyes oh Assad’. A similar one says: *ya Bashar la tihtam ‘andak sh’ab byshrab dam* (‘Oh Bashar, do not care, you have people who drink blood’).<sup>182</sup> These slogans were mostly repeated by forces loyal to the Assad regime that, as this chapter discussed, were predominated by Alawites. However, importantly, they were also chanted by pro-Assad Syrians, who flaunted indicators of their communal belonging, such as the Zulfiqar sword and the Alawite accent.<sup>183</sup> In parallel, flags that were waved by each identity group reproduced sectarian identities and generated clashes, since they visibly advocated particular identity over the others. For example, the black flag emblazoned with Arabic script that reads, ‘there is no God but God’, refers to a Salafi-Jihadi identity, and was usually flown by Sunni rebels while they chanted *al-sh’ab yuryd al-khilafa Islamiyya*, ‘the people want the establishment of an

<sup>180</sup> For instance, on a video uploaded on YouTube, key figures of the Sunni rebels appear while chanting this slogan. See “abdulbasit al-sarut fi homs: bidna nbyd al-alawiyyin”, (‘Abdul Basit al-Sarut in Homs: we want to massacre the Alawites’), YouTube, accessed on 3/11/2013, available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2\\_6\\_CKf1sc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2_6_CKf1sc). Also see a video uploaded on YouTube showing protesters in deir al-zour chanting cheerfully *bedna nshyl el Alawiyya* ‘we want to overthrow the Alawites’, see “dir el-zour: ha ha bdna nshil al-alawiyya” (‘we want to overthrow the Alawites; Deir el Zour’), YouTube, accessed on 3/11/2013 available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhwQUdNBbD0>

<sup>181</sup> Author’s interview with an anonymous Alawite 3/1/2013 in Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>182</sup> Fieldwork, Syria on 27/3/ 2012, at a pro-Assad mass rally in Damascus.

<sup>183</sup> Fieldwork, Syria on 15/3/2012, at a pro-Assad mass rally in the Umayyad Square in Damascus, and on 20/4/2012 at pro-Assad mass rally in the sabi’a bahrat square in Damascus.

Islamic Caliphate'.<sup>184</sup> Similarly, the green or the white flag with the same writing is associated with the Salafis, and was often fluttered by Sunni rebels chanting Islamic slogans, like *hiz kaffak hizw haz dyn Mohamed klu 'izz* ('shake your hand, shake it, the religion of Mohamed is full of glory'), and *qa'idna li al-abad saydna Mohamed* ('Our leader forever is our prophet Mohamed').<sup>185</sup> In this context, anti-Shiite slogans were also chanted by some Sunni rebels, a prime example says *la Iran w la Hezbollah, bidna Muslim ykhaf Allah*, 'neither Iran nor Hezbollah, we want a Muslim who fears God'.<sup>186</sup> On the other hand, slogans against the Sunni bloc were commonly shouted during pro-Assad rallies. One popular anti-Qatari slogan runs: *il ma bysafi'.. 'amu qatariyya*, 'you are a son of a Qatari if you do not applaud'. Another slogan says: *bi saraha w 'al makshouf 'ikhwanji ma bedna nshouf*, 'frankly and openly, we do not want to see any member of the Muslim brotherhood'.<sup>187</sup> Seen in this light, the regime's forces (particularly *Shabiyya*) attached the Syrian flag to portraits of Assad while writing anti-Islamist and anti-uprising graffiti, such as *la 'ilah ila Bashar* ('No God but Bashar'), *al Assad aw la ahad* ('either Assad or no one') and *al-Assad aw nahriq al-balad* ('either Assad or we will burn the country').<sup>188</sup> Such graffiti directly linked the fate of the Alawites to that of Bashar Assad and, henceforth, characterised the Alawite identity as an endangered identity group, struggling for its survival against the Sunnis.<sup>189</sup> Indeed, the use of such sectarian discourse by both identity groups created audible and visual provocations, and played a crucial role in reinforcing Alawite and Sunni identities against each other.

Equally important in inciting identity clashes between these groups was the sectarian language adopted by a number of anti-Assad Sunnis. Some examples of this language are the sectarian names referring to militias, commanders and military operations. These names evoke Sunni

<sup>184</sup>For instance see "Halab, myassar: al-sh'b yuryd khilafa Islamiyya", ('Myasar , Aleppo; People want the Islamic Caliphate'), YouTube, accessed on 3/11/2013, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybPyOzs0Y4w>

<sup>185</sup> See appendix 12. Fieldwork, Syria 2012 during protests in Lawan area in the suburb of Damascus on 4/5/2012. 30/5/2012 and 9/7/2012. Also, during a funeral for anti-Assad activists in Kafrsuseh, Damascus on 30/4/2012 and on 5/5/2012.

<sup>186</sup> Fieldwork Syria February-October 2012, and also see video uploaded by anti-Assad activist for a protest in Dar'a in which protesters chant this slogan. "la Iran wa la Hezbollah bidna muslim ykhaf allah" ('Neither Iran nor Hezbollah we want a Muslim who fears God'), YouTube, accessed on 30/3/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5fsffNiKfw>.

<sup>187</sup>Fieldwork, Damascus on 3/3/2012 during a pro-Assad rally in Sabi' bahrat.

<sup>188</sup> Fieldwork in Lawan on 21/3/2012. Also in Mazih area in Damascus on 8/3/2012. And in Jdiyydyt 'artuz on 12/7/2012, and in Sahnaya suburb of Damascus on 2/6/2012.

<sup>189</sup> "al-assad aw nahruq al balad" ('al- Assad or we will burn the country'), ahewar website, accessed on 11/5/2013, available at <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/s.asp?aid=342603>



symbols, such as the Sunni Hawks Militia and the Ibn Taimiyya Battalions. In addition, many Sunni internet activists refer to Alawites as *qurud al-jabal* ('monkeys of the mountain'), which recalls the Alawites' history as a persecuted group. Also, they often referred to Alawite districts as *mustawtanat al-'alawiyya*, ('the Alawite settlements'). This sectarian discourse served to spread anti-Alawite sentiment, and to depict the Alawites as outsiders. On the other hand, some Alawites described Sunnis as *'ara'iyr* in reference to 'adnan 'ar'our, the anti-Assad Salafi cleric. Moreover, each identity group tended to dub the corpses of other group members as *fataiyyis*, which translates literally as 'the dead animals'.

In this context, a pivotal source of sectarian provocation operating at the grassroots level was the songs created by Sunni rebels throughout the uprising. The most radical examples are two popular jihadi songs that were first sung in Idlib. The first is named: *shurta nusayriyya* ('nussayri police'). A brief of the song is as follow:

"Oh Alawites wait, we are going to slaughter you without an agreement. They say that I am a terrorist; I'm honored, I replied [...]'".<sup>190</sup>

The second song expresses the uprising as an anti-Alawite fight, it says: "Oh you listen Bashar [Assad], Sunni people revolted, opened fire on *Shabiyyha* and murdered them".<sup>191</sup>

Likewise, from the onset of the uprising many Alawite singers produced pro-Assad songs that were commonly sung during pro-Assad demonstrations and car rallies. In these car rallies, Alawite youths drive their tinted-windowed Mercedes and Range Rovers displaying pictures of Assad and the Zulfiqar sword. Playing these songs at high volume, the youths cruise around the upmarket districts of Damascus, such as malki and abu-rummanah.<sup>192</sup> It should be noted that Damascenes would have known that these were Alawite youths, as they largely came from Alawite elite in Damascus, such like those of Ismail, Ibrahim and Suliman families. Hence, all of the components (the songs, singers, pictures and the people displaying them) were associated with Alawite identity and were seen as reinforcing it. One example of these songs is the one by Ali al-Dyk, which says "Oh Bashar [Assad] whatever happens [...] we shall remain your soldiers". Interestingly, in the

<sup>190</sup>"nashid min tfl souriyy mujahed" ('Song by a Syrian Mujahed child'), YouTube, accessed on 6/10/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B6RCaUQEU4c> .

<sup>191</sup>"jabhit al-nusra tuhni' al-muslimiyyin bi eid al-'adha" ('Nusra Front greets Muslims for Adha Eid'), YouTube, accessed on 3/11/2013, available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r\\_BXDMvacW427/10/2012](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_BXDMvacW427/10/2012)

<sup>192</sup>Fieldwork, Syria March-October 2012.



middle of this song, there is a soundbite of Hassan Nassrallah saying “life for Syria’s Assad”.<sup>193</sup> A second example is a song by Wafiq Habib that runs: “Oh Bashar do not care, Syria is with you”.<sup>194</sup> A final example is a song by Hussein al-Dyk, that says: “Syria is fine and our leader is fine, [...]. Oh Bashar your army is protecting the house”.<sup>195</sup>

In addition to the sectarian slogans, language, graffiti and songs that triggered the Alawite versus Sunni identity clashes, many sectarian jokes were circulated amongst Syrians, which bolstered communal affiliations at the grassroots level. The following are some examples:

‘An Alawite asks a Sunni angrily: Why do they claim that we have sectarianism in Syria? We do not have sectarianism at all, because in Syria there is only one sect; the Alawites.’

‘A Sunni tells an Alawite, I can assure you a hundred percent that all Alawites will be treated fairly after the uprising. All of them will be sent back to their mountains to collect olives’.<sup>196</sup>

‘How beautiful is the religious coexistence that we have in Syria. We have a mosque for Muslims, next to a church for Christians and just next to them stands a security branch for the Alawites’.

By using sarcasm and irony, these jokes address anti-Alawite and Anti-Sunni affiliations and reproduce the sectarian identity of each group. In summary, symbols, songs, slogans, graffiti and jokes that express support or enmity for the Sunni or Alawite identity groups played a crucial role in reproducing sectarian identities from a bottom-up approach.

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<sup>193</sup>“ya Bashar mitalk myn, anta ya ‘aly al-jbyn”, (‘Oh Bashar who looks like you, you who have a high forehead’), YouTube, accessed on 3/11/2013, available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J34\\_VIe8Mzw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J34_VIe8Mzw)

<sup>194</sup>“hiyyw souriyya”, (‘Salute Syria’), YouTube, accessed on 3/11/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9mMVLAWRRw>

<sup>195</sup> “Souriyya bi khyr”, (‘Syria is fine’), YouTube, accessed on 2013, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cN4Zn-3RNg>.

<sup>196</sup> As explained in Chapter one, historically, Alawites inhabited the mountains.

## Conclusion

Based on the above account, it seems that throughout the first two years of the uprising, identity clashes between Sunnis and Alawites were provoked by internal and external actors, and by material and symbolic factors. The interaction between sectarian discourses directed from above and from below established the necessary context for the outbreak of identity clashes between these groups. Seemingly, the Assad regime's security and military solutions posed lethal implications for both the Alawite and the Sunni identities. By pitting Alawite-dominated forces against Sunni rebels, the regime reproduced the Alawite identity and provoked sectarian action by the Sunnis. This served to embody the uprising as a sectarian fight *per se*. Furthermore, it linked Assad's survival to that of the Alawites themselves. Besides, the sectarian actions of loyalist forces and the *security dilemma* that affected both identity groups played essential roles in fueling the identity clashes. In addition, by manipulating the Sufi identity, the regime revived Salafism, which brought out a radical streak in Sunni identity. Meanwhile, anti-Assad Syrian Sunni political entrepreneurs utilised material structures (media, arms and charitable networks), and symbolic features (the adoption of a particular flag and the projection of discourse invoking Syrian myths, such as the citations from Ibn Taimiyya's works) in their attempts to advance a particular version of Sunni identity, hence playing a pivotal role in provoking Sunnis against the Alawites. Likewise, external state and non-state actors manipulated identities for *realpolitik* gains, and in doing so also pitted the Alawite identity against the Sunni identity, inciting the clashes using a top-down approach. Paralleling this discourse manufactured from above, symbolic elements referring to a specific identity group triggered the clashes from below, since they influentially stressed the ethnic boundaries between identity groups. Moreover, the *security dilemma* that affected both Alawites

and Sunnis led both parties to believe that they were fighting for their survival, accelerating the outbreak of identity clashes.

## **Chapter Four**

### **The Kurdish identity; from banishment to empowerment**

The Kurdish question adds a problematic dimension to the identity dilemma in Syria that exploded with the uprising. Unsurprisingly, the uprising provided a window of opportunities for the Kurds in Syria to achieve their objectives, which varied from moderate to radical. Like other factions of the Syrian society, the Kurds did not represent a monolithic clique, nor did they endorse a united agenda. Instead, they were subjected to a continuous process of fragmentation. In this light, the Kurdish identity also seems to have been subjected to a drastic process of reproduction by state and non-state political entrepreneurs, who employed materialistic and symbolic features to craft an identity that would facilitate their rule. This chapter analyses the various aspects of this process. The first section examines the role of the Syrian regime and the Kurdish political entrepreneurs in the reproduction of Kurdish identity from above. This is followed by a study of the involvement of external state and non-state actors (namely, those in Turkey and Iraq) in reproducing the Kurdish identity. The second section studies the role of symbolic features in reconstructing the Kurdish identity and in inflaming identity clashes from a bottom-up approach.

#### **1. Discourses from above:**

### 1.1. The Syrian regime rapprochement with the Kurds

Fundamentally, the troubled Syrian regime strove to discourage the Kurdish identity group from joining the rebellion. Thus, from the onset of the uprising, the regime attempted to inveigle the Kurds into trusting it by turning a blind eye to all revolutionary activities in the Kurdish enclaves, and by allowing anti-Assad Kurds to operate there without punishment. Many anti-Assad Kurds interviewed by the author in Syria, assured that the regime's security services in Kurdish areas were aware that anti-Assad activities were taking place, during the early days of the uprising, yet they opted to ignore it. According to Hamber, a 26 year-old anti-Assad Kurd from Qamishli:

“during the first months of the uprising, we [the Kurdish youth] were protesting while displaying revolutionary flags and chanting anti-Assad slogans right in front of the regime's security services, who totally ignored us. Not a single bullet was fired against us”.<sup>197</sup>

In essence, the Assad regime adopted a policy of containment in relation to the Kurds. In the first place, only one month after the uprising, a governmental grant of citizenship was issued to thousands of Kurds in northern Syria who (as has been discussed in Chapter Two) had been deprived of this right for decades.<sup>198</sup> Secondly and more importantly, the regime formed an indirect alliance with a key Kurdish player, the Democratic Union Party or the *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (PYD) in Kurdish.<sup>199</sup> In accordance with this alliance, in July 2012 Assad's forces completely withdrew from Kurdish areas and henceforth granted the Kurds a quasi-autonomy, in which the PYD was allowed to fill the political and security vacuums. Seemingly, this boosted the PYD's power over other players.<sup>200</sup> The regime's logic behind this *realpolitik* strategy was twofold. First and foremost, the regime wished to contain the Kurdish threat. Secondly, the alliance was made in an attempt to fragment the opposition, as it encouraged the growth of faction not just amongst Kurds themselves, but between Kurds and Arabs as well. Another motive for the regime's

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<sup>197</sup> Author's interview with Hamber in Damascus 1/10/2012.

<sup>198</sup> “Syria's Kurds: A struggle within a Struggle”, International Crisis Group (ICG) N 136 22 January 2013, p 14.

<sup>199</sup> Next part of this section provides a discussion on PYD.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid, p. 2. Also see “Syria's Kurds: Trouble past, uncertain future”, Carnegie website, accessed on 22/4/2013, available at <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=49703>

empowerment of the PYD was to challenge Turkey, since the PYD which is now functioning across the southern Turkish border, has long been a thorn in Turkey's side. Consequently, the regime's rhetoric manipulated the Kurdish identity, as it pitted it against Arab identity and inflamed identity clashes on a top-down approach. Furthermore, as the following sections argue, the regime discourse interplays with discourses by Kurdish political entrepreneurs and also with discourses at the grassroots level in redrawing ethnic boundaries between Arab and Kurdish identity groups.

### *1.2. Attempts by Kurdish political entrepreneurs to reproduce Kurdish identity*

In the outbreak of the uprising, three actors emerged as key players struggling to gain a foothold in the Kurdish political theater. However, their power differs according to economic, social and geographic factors. Each of them sought to promote a different version of Kurdish identity by exploiting materialistic and symbolic elements. These players are: 1) – the PYD, a Syrian Kurdish branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* (PKK), 2) - the Kurdish National Council (KNC), a coalition of Kurdish leftist parties, and 3) - the Union of Kurdish Youth Committees in Syria (UKYC), an umbrella opposition group that includes all Kurdish revolutionary youth movements. Indeed, the first two actors constitute the old guard of the Kurdish opposition, whilst the UKYC represents what this thesis considers to be the new guard of the Syrian secular opposition. As this section argues, three of these actors played crucial roles in reproducing Kurdish identity from above.

#### *1.2.1 The PYD: an emerging hegemony?*

Although the Syrian regime's policies towards the PYD deprived the latter of appearing legitimate in the eyes of many Syrian Arabs and some Kurds, the PYD nevertheless succeeded in establishing itself as the "most powerful Kurdish player".<sup>201</sup> The PYD was founded in 2003 by PKK militants of Syrian origin in the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq. Subsequently, the party came to be

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<sup>201</sup> ICG January 2013. op.cit., p. 1-14

ideologically and militarily affiliated with the PKK.<sup>202</sup> Mainly, the PYD's rhetoric prioritises an affiliation with Kurdistan over an affiliation with the Syrian state, and advocates the creation of 'Western Kurdistan' [referring to the Kurdish enclaves in northeast Syria] as an autonomous state in a federal structure. The PYD's constitution states that the party adheres to "federalization since it indicates the most appropriate solution for Kurds in Western Kurdistan".<sup>203</sup> However, the constitution rejects territorial separation, and emphasises that Western Kurdistan should exist within a "free democratic Syria". In this vein, Saleh Muslim, (leader of the PYD since 2010), gave general summary of the PYD's standpoint in relation to the separation of the Syrian state:

"The PYD believes that the Kurdish areas are part of Greater Syria, and hence we seek to collaborate with our partners in this country and to establish a democratic system in which Kurds can enjoy their rights. We do not seek liberation, but are determined to govern our own affairs by ourselves".<sup>204</sup>

However, experts argue that the intimate ties between the PKK and the PYD illustrate the PYD's secessionist aspirations, and the latter has been accused of intangibly defining the concept of autonomy.<sup>205</sup> Moreover, the PYD openly shares the PKK's ideology, and echoes its political phraseology of 'democratic autonomy'. The PKK and the PYD share a common objective of producing a transnational identity that belongs to Kurdistan and not to the Syrian territorial state.<sup>206</sup> In order to craft such an identity, the PYD has striven, since the early days of the uprising, to establish a power triangle composed of arms, money and a supportive base. In fact, as observers on the ground have assured, the PYD has successfully created this triangle thanks to the logistic support of the Syrian regime and to the PKK's funding.<sup>207</sup> At the head of this triangle is the Popular Protection Unit or the *Yekineyen Parastina Gel* (YPG). This is the PYD's paramilitary wing that

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<sup>202</sup> "The rise of Syria's Kurds" Sada Website, accessed on 27/4/2013, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/02/05/rise-of-syria-s-kurds/fa7v>

<sup>203</sup> See "Political program" on the PYD Facebook page, accessed on 1/4/2013, available at <https://www.facebook.com/#!/groups/381752831836315/?fref=ts>

<sup>204</sup> "Mawqi' murasyoun al-almayy yujry muqabala ma' al-ra'ys al-mushtarak li hizbina: saleh muslem" ('the German website murasyoun interviews our party leader Saleh Muslim'), PYD website, accessed on 23/4/2013, available at [http://www.pydrojava.net/ara/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=11035%3A-qq-&catid=77%3A2011-09-08-18-49-40&Itemid=60](http://www.pydrojava.net/ara/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=11035%3A-qq-&catid=77%3A2011-09-08-18-49-40&Itemid=60)

<sup>205</sup> ICG January 2013. op.cit., p. 20

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Author's Interview with Kurdish of ras al-ayn, via Skype 21/4/2013.

consists of some 10,000 well-trained fighters, most of whom are former PKK fighters of Syrian origin who entered Syria from neighboring Turkey. The YPG is the strongest militia functioning in the Kurdish areas, and it has filled the vacuum left by the regime's forces.<sup>208</sup> Its main mission is to secure the Kurdish zones, monitor the borders with Iraq and Turkey and most importantly, to thwart the attempts of any rivals to take power. Yet, in the eyes of many Syrian Arabs and of some Kurds, the YPG lacked legitimacy and was perceived as being a proxy for the regime.<sup>209</sup>

Paralleling this military power, the PYD formed the People's Council of Western Kurdistan (PCWK), which is an institutional body that delivers social services to the Kurdish areas, and which supplies humanitarian aid to those in need. Also, the PCWK established schools and centres that focus on teaching the Kurdish language, and on restoring the original Kurdish names to towns, cities and villages in the Syrian Kurdish areas.<sup>210</sup> In other words, the PCWK's main aim is to reinforce the Kurdish identity of the Kurdish areas in Syria. In fact, many Syrian Kurds interviewed by the author affirmed that the PCWK have widened the support base of the PYD, as it answered the need of the people efficiently given the absence of state institutions. As a Syrian Kurd of Dirbasiyya eloquently summarised:

"The PCWK deals successfully with day-to-day needs, by providing things like fuel, gas and flour to Kurdish people, especially in the remote areas. Although I do not agree with the PYD's logic, practically speaking it succeeded in governing the Kurdish affairs during the hard circumstances of the uprising. If an election is to take place among the Kurds now, I can assure you that the PYD would win 100% of the votes".<sup>211</sup> Hence, through this material structure which comprises charitable network and military wing, the PYD managed to secure the third corner of its power triangle: the supportive base. Forming a large part of this supportive base are the rural, lower-middle class areas such like Jarabulus and Dyriyyk of al-Hassaka.<sup>212</sup>

Against this backdrop, *security dilemma* seems to interact with discourses directed from above and to consequently reproduce the Kurdish identity. Indeed, Arab-Kurd confrontations were reported

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<sup>208</sup> "The rise of Syria's Kurds" *op.cit.*

<sup>209</sup> ICG January 2013 *op.cit.*, p: 14

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13

<sup>211</sup> Authors interview with an anonymous Kurd of Dirbasiyya, 10/3/2013 Skype.

<sup>212</sup> "Syria's Kurds: Trouble past, uncertain future", *op.cit.*

for several weeks in January 2013 in Ras al-ayn town ('*Serê Kaniyê*' in Kurdish) on the Turkish border, when militias affiliated with the NF raided the town and killed several members of the YPG. Reportedly, the Jihadist militias staged the attack against the PYD, since they consider it as a proxy for the Syrian regime. The fighting escalated briskly as more Jihadi militias crossed the border from Turkey.<sup>213</sup> Although a ceasefire was declared a few weeks later, tensions remained high. As a result, fear and chaos spread among other Kurdish towns which, after the clashes, had a renewed sense of gratitude towards the military wing of the PYD which protected them from their Arab fellows.<sup>214</sup> The clashes, therefore, seem to have emphasised the Kurdish identity, and enhanced the PYD's popularity. Serdar, a Kurdish Syrian Journalist of *Serê Kaniyê*, summarised the implications of these clashes for Kurds:

"The clashes gave the PYD a heroic role, as many Kurds perceived that the PYD had defended them from attacks by radical Arab militias, and that hereafter it will safeguard their existence throughout the chaotic and insecure situation that is currently unfolding, and which is to continue in the post-Assad era. Prior to the clashes, the PYD was not popular among residents of *Serê Kaniyê*, who were leaning more towards the KNC. But now, all of them support it. In their eyes, PYD is protecting them, as well as addressing their daily needs. It gives them security and bread".<sup>215</sup>

In essence, the PYD injected a strong Kurdish subtext to its rhetoric and activities, and manipulated symbols from Kurdish history in order to reinforce the Kurdish identity using a top-down approach. For instance, portraits of the PKK's leader Abdullah Ocalan (an icon for Kurdish nationalism) were constantly displayed during rallies organised by the PYD, and the script on the banners was mostly written in Kurdish. Other features of PYD mass rallies utilised Kurdish symbols, such as traditional customs and music. Furthermore, the Kurdish and the party flags were

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<sup>213</sup> "fierce clashes pit Syrians Kurds against Jihadist", AFP website, accessed on 23/4/2013, available at <http://www.aina.org/news/20130119104856.htm>

<sup>214</sup> "Syria's crisis: Border town show conflict's patchwork forces", BBC website, accessed on 23/4/2013, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21627499>

<sup>215</sup> Author's interview with Serdar, 21/4/2013, Skype.



the only flags waved, the revolutionary flag was not acknowledged.<sup>216</sup> In this respect, the PYD's modus operandi seemed to accord with its agenda without paralleling the nation-wide uprising.

Importantly, the PYD constructed its own communication tools for promoting its logic. For instance, it has a website that publishes news and articles concerning Kurdish affairs in Syria, and which use discourse that promotes the Kurdish identity. For example, it refers to the Kurdish areas in Syria as 'Western Kurdistan' omitting any mention of Syria. Moreover, under a subsection titled 'pictures of Kurdistan', the website shows landscape pictures that were taken in some Kurdish areas in Syria.<sup>217</sup> Besides, the PYD has created a Facebook page that has some 18,700 members, in which the party posts its news. Also, the PYD founded a Channel on YouTube to which it regularly uploads videos of its activities.<sup>218</sup>

### *1.2.2 The KNC: fragility and division?*

The KNC is an umbrella opposition group that was co-founded in Erbil, Iraq under the patronage of Massoud Barazani, president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The KNC consists of sixteen Kurdish parties belonging to the old guard, but it is dominated by individuals affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which is Barazani's own party.<sup>219</sup> Although the KNC is the PYD's only rival, its chances are nonetheless limited, due to the growth of fragmentation and faction amongst its members over constitutive issues like ideology and framework. Furthermore, power struggles and personal enmity seem to have hindered the KNC in pursuit of its objectives.<sup>220</sup> The KNC originally sought to produce an identity based on the Kurdish patriotic feeling, and to achieve a greater degree of autonomy for the Kurdish people, while acting in a context of transnational affiliation with Syria. However, unlike the PYD, the KNC advocated more

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<sup>216</sup> ICG January 2013. *op.cit.*, p. 11. Also see pictures of various rallies organized by the PYD on PYD Website, accessed on 7/10/2013, available at <http://www.pydrojava.net/en/>

<sup>217</sup> "Qamishlo" PYD Website, accessed on 2/4/2013, available at on <http://kurdistan.pydrojava.com/#home>

<sup>218</sup> The PYD Facebook Page, accessed on 23/4/2013, available at <https://www.facebook.com/#!/groups/381752831836315/?fref=ts>. Also see the PYD channel on YouTube, accessed on 26/10/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/user/pydrojava?feature=mhum#p/u>

<sup>219</sup> "The Kurdish National Council", Carnegie Website, accessed on 23/4/2013, available at <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48502>

<sup>220</sup> "Syria's Kurds: Trouble past, uncertain future", *op.cit.* also see ICG January 2013, *op.cit.*, p.18

of a policy of integration with post-Assad Syria. In its discourse, the KNC frequently voices an affiliation with the Syrian state. As a brief extract from its political framework highlights this perspective:

“The Syrian people are undertaking an epic, peaceful, revolutionary journey that seeks to oust authoritarianism from power. This revolution aims to build a democratic plural state, a *watan*, (‘motherland’) for all [Syrians], regardless of their religions, ethnicities and sects. The Kurdish people in Syria presents one component of the Syrian people, [and] an essential and purebred ingredient of the country. [Hence, KNC calls for] the elimination of discriminatory policies and laws, including the prohibition of the use of the Kurdish language and the establishment of Kurdish schools. The KNC advocates a policy of political decentralisation, while remaining in the context of Syria’s territorial entity”.<sup>221</sup> However, this only a vague delineation of the KNC’s concept of decentralisation.

Indeed, the KNC aimed to reproduce Kurdish identity by emphasising the importance of Kurdish elements, and by exploiting the symbols and myths from Kurdish history. For example, the KNC’s website devoted a special section to stories about Kurdish national heroes, dubbed ‘in order not to forget’.<sup>222</sup> Another section labeled ‘today’s character’<sup>223</sup>, and a subsection titled ‘today in history’ was designed to evoke special events in the Kurdish history. Additionally, the KNC often displayed both the Kurdish and the party flags alongside portrait of Barazani and other Kurdish nationalists, while the revolutionary flag was rarely waved by members of the Council.

Importantly, although the KNC was founded in the early months of the uprising and fought hard to gain momentum, it nevertheless seemed that it could not secure a solid enough foothold to compete with the PYD and its material resources are weak in comparison with that of the PYD. In the first place, the KNC lacked a military presence equal to that of the YPG. Although the KDP trained thousands of KNC fighters, these were mainly Kurdish defectors from the Syrian army who were based in KRG and not in the Syrian Kurdish areas. Very few of them were operating in

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<sup>221</sup> “KNC’s Political framework”, KNC website, accessed on 23/4/2013, available at [http://www.knc-s.com/detail\\_articals.php?id=273&z=2&l=1](http://www.knc-s.com/detail_articals.php?id=273&z=2&l=1)

<sup>222</sup> “ky la nansa” (‘in order not to forget’), KNC website, accessed on 7/10/2013, available at <http://www.knc-s.com/allartical.php?z=35&l=1>

<sup>223</sup> “shakhsyat al-youm” (‘Today’s character’), KNC website, accessed on 7/10/2013, available at <http://www.knc-s.com/allartical.php?z=9&l=1>

Syria, and unlike YPG, their military presence was modest and fragile.<sup>224</sup> Secondly, the KNC initiated a low-scale charitable network that provided social services to Kurdish people, such as distributing food baskets to those in need. This network operated mainly in urban area and as a Kurdish activist affiliated with the KNC affirms, this compromised its effectiveness:

“KNC’s social services [w]re not efficient and [were] not comparable to that of the PYD. Unlike the PYD, the KNC lacked the funds and the logistic capabilities to deliver its services”.<sup>225</sup>

In this vein, the KNC seemed to form a social contract with a particular stratum, namely the urban middle-classes of Amoda in Hassaka and Kobani in Aleppo. Unlike the PYD, the KNC was unable to mobilise the lower-classes from the rural and remote areas.<sup>226</sup>

### *1.2.3. Union of Kurdish Youth Committees in Syria (UKYC), the new guard of the Kurdish opposition: vulnerabilities and inadequate chances?*

A mere few weeks after the uprising, UKYC was created by apolitical Kurdish youths who operated under the umbrella of the Local Coordination Committees (LCC), - a pivotal force in the uprising consisted of youth groups who organised themselves by resorting to social media-.<sup>227</sup> Essentially, the UKYC strove for the advancement of a civic identity that was based on citizenship rights, and which vehemently opposed secessionist aspirations while stressing the importance of association with the Syrian state. According to its manifesto, the group believes that:

“The Kurdish national affiliation does not compete with the Syrian affiliation, rather they overlap each other. We do respect all the components of the Syrian society [...]. The Kurdish people are an essential component of Syria, and hence they should accomplish their political, cultural and socio-economic rights. The Kurdish language should be considered as the first language in Syria

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<sup>224</sup> ICG January 2013., *op.cit.*, p. 4-18

<sup>225</sup> Author’s interview with an anonymous KNC activist 22/4/2013, Skype.

<sup>226</sup> “Syria’s Kurds: Trouble past, uncertain future”, *op.cit.*. And also see ICG January 2013., *op.cit.* p. 4-5

<sup>227</sup> For an informative account on the LCC’s roles during the Syrian uprising see Anthony Shdaid “Coalition of Factions From the Streets Fuels a New Opposition in Syria”, *The New York Times* (30/6/2011)

besides Arabic. The governing system of the Kurdish areas inside the Syrian state border should be determined via a public referendum by those inhabiting these areas”.<sup>228</sup>

In essence, UKYC’s members represent the new guard in the Kurdish opposition who are educated, secular middle-class young people aged between 19 and 30. Most of these Kurdish youths are university students. Thus, prior to the uprising, they were not residing at the Kurdish enclaves. Although the main governmental universities are based in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Latakia and Deir el-Zour, some key departments are based in Damascus University. Even though the private universities mushroomed in the mid-2000s, most of them were based in the suburbs of Damascus and were dominated by the elite of urban areas, who by and large are Arabs. Hence, Kurdish students had to move to other cities, mainly Damascus, Homs and Aleppo, to study and consequently, these youth became more integrated with Syrian Arabs than with the less educated contemporaries who remained in the Kurdish enclaves. Moreover, they became more integrated with Syrian Arabs than the older generation. Significantly, these Kurdish youths went back to their cities and towns after the outbreak of the uprising where, they attempted to establish ties between the Kurdish movements in their areas and with other youth groups from Arab areas. This served to enhance the Arab-Kurdish relations and to foster the growth of Syrian nationalism.<sup>229</sup> For instance, a 25 year-old UKYC activist and medical student of Damascus University stresses his affiliation with the Syrian state. When asked whether he considers himself as a Syrian Kurd or a Kurd Syrian, he instantly replied:

“I have always been asked to answer this question. But I cannot, and I consider it as senseless. It is as if you are asking me who I love more, my mother or my father?. I am a Syrian and I am a Kurd, why do I have to select one of them to come first?”.<sup>230</sup>

An unaffiliated Kurdish youth interviewed by the International Crisis Group shares his perspective:

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<sup>228</sup> The UKYC Facebook page, accessed on 24/4/2013, available at <https://www.facebook.com/Kurdish.youth.union3/info>

<sup>229</sup> Fieldwork Syria February – October 2012. Also see ICG January 2013., *op.cit.*, p.17.

<sup>230</sup> Author’s interview with an anonymous Kurdish rebel 1/10/ 2012 in Damascus.

“There is a country called Syria, and as young Kurds we are part of it. I am a Kurd and a Syrian at the same time. I feel closer to a Syrian Arab of my age than to an Iraqi Kurd. The solution I see in Syria is to have a secular and democratic state that recognises my identity as a Kurd. I see my future with Syria, not with Barazani”.<sup>231</sup>

However, on the other hand, some revolutionary youths of Arab origin voiced their suspicions about the UKYC’s endorsement of Kurdish symbolic elements, such as the Kurdish flag or graffiti in Kurdish language. For example, during an anti-regime protest in the Lawan district in the suburbs of Damascus (attended by the author), some Kurdish youth of the Barazeh area were banned by their Arab fellows from displaying the Kurdish flag, and as a result the Kurdish youth displayed their anger by leaving the protest.<sup>232</sup> Hence, the Kurdish new guard and the Arab new guard does not constitute a solid opposition group. However, the new guard of the Kurdish opposition were determined to show their support of the nation-wide rebellion. For instance, the UKYC launched its anti-regime rallies on Fridays, and echoed the slogans, banners and themes of Friday’s demonstrations that were taking place in other Syrian cities in order to express solidarity with their fellow Arabs -as during the uprising, the main demonstrations often took place after Friday’s prayer session-. On the other hand, the PYD and the KNC held their rallies on Wednesdays to distinguish themselves from anti-Assad Syrian Arabs.<sup>233</sup> However, although the youth of the UKYC are extremely active on the ground and formed the bedrock of the uprising in the Kurdish areas, their activities seem to have been restricted to urban areas, (particularly to Amouda and Qamishli) where, according to observers the PYD has a weaker position. In essence, the UKYC manipulated symbols and the accessible material structure in its attempts to reproduce a civic version of Kurdish identity that encourages Syrian-Kurdish cohesion. A good indicator is the profile picture of UKYC’s Facebook page (which has some 17,000 members), that shows the Syrian map surrounded by the revolutionary flag and the Kurdish flag, while in the middle writing in Arabic and in Kurdish reads: ‘Syria is for all Syrians’.<sup>234</sup> Moreover, in addition to using the Arabic language, the UKYC applied terminology that highlighted an affiliation with Syria, such

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<sup>231</sup> ICG January 2013., *op.cit.*, p.18

<sup>232</sup> Fieldwork on 24/5/2012 in Lawan suburb of Damascus.

<sup>233</sup> ICG January 2013, *op.cit.*, p.9

<sup>234</sup> See appendix 13. Also the picture is available on the UKYC Facebook Page, accessed on 26/10/2013, available at, <https://www.facebook.com/#!/photo.php?fbid=631213880230796&set=a.375000972518756.93814.284889871529867&type=1&theater>.

as ‘Syria’, ‘Syrian people’, ‘the uprising of Syrian people’. This contrasts with the stances of the PYD and the KNC, who frequently refer to the Kurdish enclaves as Kurdistan’s Syria or Western Kurdistan, and who often use the Kurdish language. In parallel, via collaboration with the UKYC, a group of apolitical Kurdish youth established a radio news station labeled *wilat* (‘motherland’ in Kurdish), which produces broadcasts that try to appeal to both Syrian Arabs and Kurds. *Wilat*’s programs and music were broadcasted in both Arabic and Kurdish in an attempt to bolster solidarity between Kurds and Arabs. According to insider sources at *wilat*, the radio station is self-funded and relies on a team of Kurdish youth who are “well-educated and work inside Syria”.<sup>235</sup>

Against this backdrop, the UKYC can be viewed as being a moderate actor in the Kurdish drama in its struggle to produce a civic trend in Kurdish identity. Yet these youths had some fatal flaws. Firstly, the UKYC lacked the funds and the support that other actors enjoyed, and it neither had a charitable network nor an armed wing to match the material power of its competitors. Secondly, the UKYC could not establish a social contract except with a particular stratum (the urban, educated youth of the middle-class), unlike its radical rival, the PYD, who successfully enlisted the support of Kurds in both remote and urban areas. Thirdly and most importantly, several members of the UKYC were subjected to suppression by the PYD and by the Syrian regime, which consequently lost them their foothold. Besides, given the length of the uprising and the speed with which it escalated, “these youth were hard-pressed to find room to grow within”.<sup>236</sup> In the words of a former UKYC activist who fled to Turkey:

“Political money and violence handicapped the UKYC and catalyst its fracture, many of its members fled the country due to the threat of the PYD, while some of them were mobilised by a particular Kurdish clique. Very few activists continued to operate there [in the Kurdish areas of Syria], but they were paralysed and were left to fight alone”.<sup>237</sup>

## Conclusion

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<sup>235</sup> Author’s interview with an anonymous Kurd, 22/4/2013 via Skype.

<sup>236</sup> ICG January 2013., *op.cit.*, p.10

<sup>237</sup> Author’s interview with Darwish via Skype 21/4/2013.

Based on the above account, it seems that these political entrepreneurs; PYD, KNC and the UKYC play crucial roles in reproducing the Kurdish identity via a top-down approach. Indeed, all of them manipulated material structure and symbolic elements to reconstruct a particular version of identity. The interaction between variables in this top-down approach (political entrepreneurs, materials, symbols) seems to interplay with each other and also with the *security dilemma*. Consequently this interaction subject the Kurdish identity to a continuous process of reproduction.

#### 1.4 *Kurdish identity amidst the realpolitik of Barazani and Erdogan:*

Like other regional players in neighboring countries, Turkey was alarmed by the power shift in the Kurdish situation across her southern borders, where the PYD, (a carbon copy of Turkey's longstanding foe, the PKK) arose as a hegemonic actor. This posed a potential threat to Turkish national security, and hence the government in Ankara sought to develop strategies for neutralising the Kurdish threat. Based on political calculations, these strategies leaned towards a policy of containment rather than escalation, as Turkey determined not to physically enter the Syrian quagmire. Hence, the Turkish administration employed strategic tactics to remedy the situation. Firstly, it strengthened the PYD's rivals, the KNC and also some Arab cliques among the opposition.<sup>238</sup> Secondly, it entered into negotiations in an effort to solve the Kurdish problem in Turkey, seeking a 'historical' rapprochement with the PKK.<sup>239</sup> Seemingly, the use of such rhetoric has had some crucial repercussions on the reproduction of Kurdish identity.

In essence, the Turks sought to empower the KNC in order to redress the balance of power amongst the Kurdish players, and thus the government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan lent its political support to the KNC via Ankara's strategic ally, Massoud Barazani. On the other hand, Barazani seemed to share Turkey's interests in curbing the PYD, since the latter presented a powerful rival

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<sup>238</sup> ICG January 2013, *op.cit.*, p.28-29

<sup>239</sup> Ian Traynor "Turkey should seize offer for peace from Kurdish guerilla leader" *Guardian*, (21/3/2013). Also see "The timing of Turkey's Kurdish strategy", *Today's Zaman* Website, accessed on 14/5/2013, available at, <http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist-313314-the-timing-of-turkeys-kurdish-strategy.html>

who would jeopardise the KDP's foothold in Kurdish areas in the post-Assad era. Also, by enacting the role of mediator, Barazani aimed to gain a certain amount of leverage in Turkey.<sup>240</sup> Pragmatically, his rhetoric vis-à-vis the PYD was twofold. In the first place, Barazani provided political, economic and, military support to the KNC but avoided causing any escalation. In the second place, he aimed to forge an alliance with the PYD in order to contain its threat. Therefore, in July 2012, just before the withdrawal of the regime's forces from the Kurdish areas, Barazani sponsored the Erbil Declaration, a power-sharing agreement between the two rivals according to which the PYD and the KNC would jointly govern Kurdish regions in Syria. Nevertheless, it seems that neither Erdogan nor Barazani achieved their objectives in curbing the PYD, since on the ground the KNC could not compete with the PYD's rapidly accelerating power.<sup>241</sup>

Additionally, Turkey sought to weaken the PYD by bolstering Syrian Arab opposition cliques who harbor anti-Kurdish sentiment, particularly the Syrian National Council (SNC), of which the KNC was a former member.<sup>242</sup> The SNC has openly and repeatedly emphasised the 'Arabic character' of Syria, and labeled the Kurdish ambition of federalism as an "illusion".<sup>243</sup> In effect, this provoked the PYD to accuse Turkey and the SNC of countering Kurdish aspirations.<sup>244</sup> Likewise, the Syrian national Coalition, (another opposition faction sponsored by Turkey), refuted the KNC's proposal to drop the word 'Arab' from the name 'Syrian Arab Republic'.<sup>245</sup> Consequently, this accentuated the Arabs-Kurdish divide.

In this light, it should be noted that, since the onset of the uprising, various factions of the non-Kurdish opposition have striven to mobilise the Kurdish population. However, it seemed that they could neither develop appropriate strategies for tackling the Kurdish question, nor for mitigating Arab-Kurdish tensions. On the one hand, Islamist opposition blocs, supported by Turkey, have

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<sup>240</sup> ICG January 2013, *op.cit.*, p.iii

<sup>241</sup> Ibid, p.4

<sup>242</sup> The SNC was founded on 23 August 2011 with the support of Turkey and Saudi Arabia. It is a collation of opposition parties that is dominated by Islamists. In November 2012, the Syrian National Coalition, a new iteration of the SNC, was founded in Qatar. For a detailed account of Arab-Kurdish ties during the uprising, see Faruq Mustafa *akrad souriyya w al-hirak al-dymouqraty* (Syria's Kurds and the democratic movement) (Beirut:Arab Scientific Publishers, 2013)

<sup>243</sup> In July 2012, during a conference for the Syrian opposition factions in Cairo, Burhan Ghalioun, the leader of the SNC at that time, insisted that "Kurds should not hold on to illusions of federalism". See ICG January 2013.,*op.cit.*,p, 39.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid

<sup>245</sup> This was a precondition forwarded by the KNC of joining the Syrian National Council, and was rebuffed later. This had a negative influence on the KNC-SNC ties. See ICG January 2013.*op.cit.*, p.80



openly criticised the KNC's rhetoric and rejected its logic while ignoring chances for reconciliation .On the other hand, cliques of the secular opposition, such as the Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (of which the PYD is a senior member), has vaguely discussed issues of federalism and autonomy that are crucial concerns for the Kurds.<sup>246</sup> Moreover, the non-Kurdish opposition could not formulate a clear vision of how the Kurdish question would be addressed in the post-Assad era. As a Kurdish analyst argues, this effectively provoked the Kurds to manipulate the uprising for their own ends:

“Kurds are now fighting to achieve their rights, which were denied by the Assad regime prior to the uprising, and which during the uprising were neglected by the opposition”.<sup>247</sup>

Against this backdrop, the conclusion that imposes itself is that the *realpolitik* strategies developed by Erdogan and Barazani played important roles in reproducing Kurdish identity that served their agendas. Although both of them applied policy of containment in their attempts to reconcile Kurdish factions, they nevertheless inflamed identity clashes from above by supporting a particular player against the other. Both politicians sought to uphold the KNC's version of a moderate identity over the PYD's radical version of Kurdish identity. Furthermore, they positioned these identities at odds with the Arab identity. Indeed, the top-down rhetoric by these external political entrepreneurs emphasised the ethnic boundaries between both identity groups.

## 2. Discourses from below

As has been discussed in chapter two, for approximately fifty years the Kurds of Syria were banned from displaying any symbolic element of their identity, such as music and costumes. Instead they were forced to alter symbolic features of their Kurdish identity to accord with Arab identity, such as by changing their Kurdish names to Arabic names.<sup>248</sup> Hence, it is unsurprisingly that since the outset of the uprising Kurds have been determined to emphasis the symbols and myths of their ethnicity. Although political entrepreneurs of the various Kurdish factions utilised Kurdish

<sup>246</sup> Farouq Mustafa, op.cit.,p.48-60

<sup>247</sup> Author's interview with an anonymous Kurd, 22/4/2013.

<sup>248</sup> See “mamnu' azadi” (‘Azadi is forbidden’), almodon, accessed on 26/4/2013, available at <http://www.almodon.com/Culture/Left-Articles/ممنوع-از-اد>

symbols to construct identity, these symbols nevertheless seemed to bolster Kurdish national sentiment at the grassroots level without being completely directed from above.

Notably, since the onset of the uprising, Kurdish language, music, dance, customs and flags have been visibly presented across Kurdish regions in Syria.<sup>249</sup> Kurds are now publicly allowed to dance the popular Kurdish *dabdkih* (a folklore dance), and to wave the Kurdish flag. Furthermore, the Newroz festival (the most important festival in the Kurdish culture), is now celebrated openly by tens of thousands of Kurds without the risk of their being punished by the Syrian regime.<sup>250</sup> Certainly, the presentation of such symbols strengthened the Kurdish sense of ethnic belonging as well as instilling in the Kurdish people a sense of pride in their ethnicity. More importantly, the public displays of such symbolic elements seem to interact with the discourses direct from above and the insecurity crisis, and therefore subject the Kurdish identity to a continuous process of reproduction. Sidar, a Kurdish youth of Qamishli, acknowledged the influential role of symbols in bolstering a Kurdish individual's affinity with his or her ethnicity. When asked to give his perspective on Kurdish Symbols, such as the Kurdish flag and the Newroz festival, he replied passionately that:

“These symbols personify my existence. When chanting *azadi* (‘freedom’ in Kurdish) and waving the Kurdish flag I tell the others that I’m a Kurd. I feel very proud of my Kurdish belonging”.<sup>251</sup>

Notably, throughout the uprising, the Kurdish language (a key symbol of Kurdish identity), dominated the discourse heard in the Kurdish enclaves where during anti-regimes marches, most slogans, songs and banners were voiced in the Kurdish language. Moreover, shortly after the withdrawal of the regime's forces, a myriad of schools started to teach core modules in Kurdish language, and devoted three hours of the school-day to teaching the Kurdish language at an

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<sup>249</sup> For comprehensive pictures of Kurdish rallies taken by international news agencies see “slogans, signs and protests: Syrian Kurds Revolt”, Al-monitor Website, accessed on 26/4/2013, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/photo-galleries/slogans-signs-and-protests-syria.html?displayTab=qamishli-lcc->.

<sup>250</sup> Newroz is held on March 21, it is a celebration that marks the first day of the Kurdish year. According to Kurdish myth, it represents the day when goodness prevailed over the devil. For more information on Newroz's role in Kurdish culture, see “Newroz: The Kurdish festival story, the forbidden festival”, KurdNet website, accessed on 26/4/2013, available at <http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2010/3/state3685.htm>

<sup>251</sup> Author's interview with Sidar 26/4/2013 Skype.

advanced level.<sup>252</sup> Speaking in Kurdish, Syrian Kurd teachers appeared on the al-Arabiya Satellite Channel, affirming that: “the first teaching language [in Kurd’s regions of Syria] should be Kurdish while Arabic and English should be secondary”.<sup>253</sup> Also, pictures and videos of rallies and other revolutionary activities conducted in the Kurdish areas were frequently posted online. As a result, many Syrian Arabs were alarmed by the dominance of Kurdish symbols, and regarded their fellow Kurds with suspicion. For instance Bakir, a Syria Arab rebel, stated his concerns about the presentation of Kurdish symbols:

“I watch videos of their [the Kurds] protests and I cannot understand a word, since everything is in Kurdish. It seems that they have already created Kurdistan in Syria. They are opportunists”.<sup>254</sup>

In this context, the Syrian regime endorsed the use of symbolic elements of Kurdish identity in its quest to mobilise the Kurds. For instance, on 21 March 2012, Syrian State TV broadcast live footage for the first time in half a century of the Newroz celebration, showing Kurdish youths dancing *dabbkih*. Furthermore, the Kurds were allowed to give interviews in the Kurdish language.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>252</sup>See for instance “taqryr al-arabiyya ‘an al-madaris al-kurdiyya fi souriyya”, (‘Al-Arabiya report about Kurdish Schools in Syria’), YouTube, accessed on 26/4/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nTxmagsf2Q> . Also, see “Crisis in Syria boosts Kurdish hope”, BBC Website, accessed on 24/4/2013, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19301543> and “Syria’s Kurds find the language of freedom”, IPS Website, accessed on 24/4/2013, available at <http://www.ipsnews.net/2012/09/syrian-kurds-find-the-language-of-freedom/>

<sup>253</sup>“taqryr al-arabiyya ‘an al-madaris al-kurdiyya fi souriyya”, (Al-Arabiya report about Kurdish Schools in Syria) *op.cit.*

<sup>254</sup> Author’s interview with Mohamed, 21/3/2012 in Damascus.

<sup>255</sup>A four-minute archived video of this celebration is available on YouTube, see “Kul nayrouz w souriyya bi alf khyr” (Happy Newroz for Syria), YouTube, accessed on 26/4/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SeYosfXrHPs> . Also, only one week after the outbreak of the uprising, the Syrian State Agency issued a news report of the Newroz celebration, which stressed that Newroz “is an opportunity to emphasise amity, freedom and peace for all, wishing that everyone could enjoy the jovial atmosphere of this social tradition which is rooted in the Syrian cultural identity.” See “Kurdish Community in Syria celebrate Nowrouz Day” SANA website, accessed on 26/4/2013, available at <http://sana.sy/eng/21/2011/03/21/337857.htm>

All in all, although the manipulation of symbols was crucial to state and non-state political entrepreneurs' quest to reproduce Kurdish identity, symbolic elements also operated at the grassroots level where they interacted with discourses directed from above in the context of the *security dilemma*, and helped to construct identity clashes. Flags, music, language, customs and other symbolic features played vital role in empowering the Kurdish identity and generating Kurdish national sentiment, in that they highlight the line that distinguishes Kurdish identity from other identities. In other words, they emphasise the notion of 'us' versus 'them', and hence serve as potential motivations for identity clashes.

## Conclusion

On the basis of this analysis, the Syrian uprising paved the way for the reconstruction of Kurdish identity. Four variables seem to play the pivotal role in reconstructing Kurdish identity and in provoking identity clashes. In the first place, state and non-state political entrepreneurs strove to reproduce a Kurdish identity that would be compliant with their aim. In the second and in the third place, all of these actors utilised materials and symbolic factors (such as media, arms and Kurdish folklore) to reinforce Kurdish identity over the Arab identity. On the one hand, the Syrian regime deployed policies of containment towards the Kurds in an attempt to divide the already fragmented opposition, and to neutralise the Kurdish risk in the northeast of the country. Hence, the regime provided the Kurds a quasi-autonomy. On the other hand, relying simultaneously on materialistic and symbolic features, the KNC, PYD and the UKYC were competing to reproduce different versions of Kurdish identity. As this chapter has demonstrated, the KNC and the PYD vied to

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achieve greater autonomy for Kurds, and to associate the national sentiment with the Kurdish nation exclusively, rather than with the Syrian state. By contrast, the UKYC attempted to reproduce a Kurdish identity that highlighted an affiliation with the Syrian state, and which sought to foster accord among Kurds and Arabs. In fact, each of these players utilised material structure, and symbolic factors to reshape the Kurdish identity while struggling to consolidate his position in relation to other players. However, wide discrepancy in capabilities afforded the PYD a hegemonic status. Although the PYD lacked international legitimacy, it succeeded in establishing a solid power triangle composed of military, economic and public bases of support. This is owing to its productive mobilisation of various social strata under its umbrella, by which it came to be the *de facto* governor of Kurdish affairs. The KNC, suffered from fragmentation, and did not succeed in forming a power triangle to equal that of the PYD. Although the KNC benefited from regional and international backing, it lacked military and public support, and could not broaden its supportive base. On the other hand, the UKYC seems to have been the weakest competitor, as it lacked any pillars of power. No arms, no funds and no support, either at the international or grassroots level. Furthermore, most youths of the UKYC fled Syria for security reasons, which played a pivotal role in thwarting their attempts to seek out integration within the Syrian state. Yet, seemingly, regardless the variation in their agendas and capabilities, all of these political entrepreneurs reproduce Kurdish identity on a top-down approach and their discourses provoke identity clashes. The final variable which seems to play pivotal role in reconstructing Kurdish identity is the insecurity crisis that the Kurds faced. Indeed, the *security dilemma* –which escalated with the length of the conflict- emphasises the ethnic boundaries between Arab and the Kurdish identity group.

In summary, policies from above, deployed by the Syrian regime, Kurdish political entrepreneurs, Syrian Arab opposition and regional powers exploited Kurdish identity for *realpolitik* ends. All of these actors manipulated material and symbolic elements to advance a particular brand of Kurdish identity. More importantly, these top-down discourses interacted with discourse directed from below, and this interaction (which takes place in the presence of *security dilemma*) subjected the Kurdish identity to an enduring process of reproduction. At the time of writing, however, it is still unclear as to what version of identity will be finalised by this process, and what implications it will pose for the post-Assad Syria. Nevertheless, the Kurdish identity has certainly entered an era

of empowerment, thanks to the *Arab spring*, which seems to have blossomed largely for the sake of Kurdish interests.

## Chapter Five

### The quest to construct *hawiyya wataniyya* or ‘national identity’:

On March 04, 2013, hundreds of anti-Assad protesters gathered in the central square of *al-Raqa* city in northern Syria, the first city to come under the absolute control of the rebels, where a gigantic bronze statue erected in honour of the late Syrian president Hafiz Assad was pulled down. Videos and pictures of this scene spread throughout the online community. This generated a widespread Syrianist sentiment, as anti-Assad activists commended the fact that, unlike what happened in Iraq in 2003, the statue of a “dictator was pulled down by national hands and not by western tanks”.<sup>256</sup> Pictures of this event were posted on social media websites, and were attached to the famous image of an American tank toppling the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad’s main square in April 2003. However, the slogan inscribed beneath the picture of Assad’s statue denotes a sense of Syrian national pride, as it reads: *sina’aah souriyya*, a ‘Syrian production’.<sup>257</sup> On the same date and location, dozens of protesters were chanting: “neither Sunnis nor Alawites, Syria is about national unity”.<sup>258</sup> Nevertheless, Islamist militants rapidly joined the protest and altered this slogan to an Islamist one that said: “our leader forever is our prophet Mohamed”.<sup>259</sup> Certainly, this incident indicated the nature of the ongoing identity clashes and, more importantly, the existing attempts to reproduce a Syrian national identity, as well as indicating that the concept of Syrianism has taken root and was functioning in the popular imagination. In this vein, Michel Kilo, a prominent opposition figure, stresses that the uprising endowed the nation with a “historical chance to reproduce a monolithic version of *hawiyya wataniyya* (‘national identity’) that is based on the notion of freedom and that would unite all Syrians”.<sup>260</sup> In fact, a myriad of secular movements emerged throughout the uprising, which strove to construct a national identity that

<sup>256</sup> Author’s interview with Hatim, 4/3/2013 Skype.

<sup>257</sup> For copy of this picture see appendix 14.

<sup>258</sup> For an online video of this protest see “ugarit al-raqa muzzahra fi dawar al-dalih ‘uqba al-tahryr”, (Ugarit: al-Raq protest at al-dalih square after the liberation), YouTube, accessed on 11/4/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0otRgG1B55k>

<sup>259</sup> *ibid*

<sup>260</sup> Author’s interview with Michel Kilo, 22/3/2013, Skype.

prioritises an affiliation with the Syrian state and advocates the establishment of *dawlet al-mwatana*, 'state of citizenship'. However, geographic, political and socio-economic factors influence the leverage of these groups, which this thesis divides into two main factions; the old guard and the new guard. Mainly, the old guard is comprised of the longstanding opposition figures who emerged out of the Arab nationalist, (also communist and leftist) traditions. Hence, the stances of anti-sectarianism, anti-westernism and anti-interventionism come naturally to these individuals. Some notable examples of these figures are Louay Hussein, Haytham Mana'a, Riad Seif, Aref Dalila, AbdulAziz al-Khayer and Michel Kilo. As has been mentioned in chapter two, some ten years prior to the uprising these figures launched the so-called *Damascus spring* which sought the establishment of a democratic state, though it was later crushed by the new inheritor of Syria's throne. On the other hand, the new guard represents the secular, apolitical youth, who were inspired by their Egyptians and Tunisians counterparts, and who, in their search for empowerment, found themselves in the midst of the political arena. However, in the two years' duration of the Syrian uprising, neither of these groups introduced a charismatic leader capable of fostering their power and, most importantly, neither of them presented a cohesive front. Instead, they were deeply divided over important issues, like violent versus peaceful struggle, and pro- military intervention versus anti-military intervention. Furthermore, those based inside Syria were at odds with those who were in exile.<sup>261</sup> Nevertheless, despite their vulnerabilities, these groups were represented in the Syrian drama, and fought hard to establish footholds that would allow them to compete with other players. Indeed, both of these political entrepreneurs directed their discourses from above and manipulated materials and symbols to reconstruct Syrian national identity, however the *security dilemma* seems to pose a critical obstacle to their attempt. This chapter studies the continuous reconstruction of Syrian national identity which resulted from the interplay between discourses directed from above and those directed from below. The first section of this chapter focuses on the role of political entrepreneurs among the old guard as well as the new guard in reproducing national identity from above. The second section examines the role of symbolic elements in reproducing national identity from below.

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<sup>261</sup>Carsten Wieland *op.cit.*p.183-186.

## 1. The top-down approach

### 1.1 Endeavours by the old guard of the Syrian opposition:

#### 1.1.1. The Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (CCDC) *ha'y'it al-tansyq li al-taghyir al-dymuqratiy*

The CCDC is a collation of fourteen leftist parties that was formally established in June 2011 in Damascus, where it mainly functions. It is commanded by renowned figures of the old guard such as Haytham Mana'a and AbdulAziz al-Khayer who come from various religious and ethnic backgrounds. For instance, Mana'a is a Sunni from Dar'a, while Khayer is an Alawite from Qurdaha, the birthplace of Assads. Essentially, the CCDC advocated the peaceful transition of Syria to a democratic state, in which all Syrians would be “treated equally despite their communal affiliations”.<sup>262</sup> Hassan AbdulAzim, its General Coordinator, summarises the CCDC's rhetoric vis-à-vis the uprising with three slogans “no to violence, no to sectarianism and no to military intervention”.<sup>263</sup> Principally, the CCDC wished to generate a national identity that would prioritise the individual's association with the Syrian nation, and to rebuff any attempts to steer the revolution towards fundamentalism. Hence, the CCDC opposed the efforts of other opposition cliques, (particularly the Islamists) to reproduce sectarian identity. In its discourse, the CCDC emphasised the use of terms such as *wataniyya* (‘patriotism’), *watan* (‘motherland’), *al-sh'ab al-souriyy* (‘the Syrian people’), and *al-qarar al-wataniy* (‘national decision’), and rejected the sectarian rhetoric of other opposition factions. Notably, since its creation, the CCDC has become an outspoken foe to other (mainly exiled) opposition groups, who supported the militarisation of the uprising and who were dominated by Islamists. Consequently, this increased the division among anti-Assad groups, and reduced the CCDC's credibility in the eyes of many Syrians, for

<sup>262</sup> “al-bayan al-ta'ssy li al-hay'a”, (‘The founding statement of the Committee’), CCDC Website, accessed on 4/12/2013, available at <http://syrianncb.org/2011/12/15/البيان-التأسيسي-للجنة-التأسيسية/>

<sup>263</sup> “Hassan AbdulAzim, “nuthamin dawr wihdaat himayt al-shab fi himayt al-madaniyyn”, (we appreciate the role of the people's deafening units in protecting the civilians) CCDC Website, accessed on 12/4/2013, available at <http://syrianncb.org/2013/01/24/>



whom the militarisation of the uprising was a reaction to the Syrian regime's military solution.<sup>264</sup> Though the CCDC sought to gather momentum and to boost its power in the period immediately after its foundation, its chances were nevertheless limited by its lack of unity, supportive base and its perceived lack of legitimacy. As has been argued in chapter two, the Syrian regime applied a strategy of divide -and- rule politics to fragment its opponents, and hence it promoted the CCDC as *al-mu'arada al-wataniyya* ('a patriotic opposition faction'), which the regime pronounced itself ready to engage in dialogue with. This raised questions about the CCDC's legitimacy, and prompted some Syrians to accuse the CCDC of allying itself with the regime. This perception was heightened by the fact that the CCDC deplored the use of armed struggle, and vehemently criticised the actions of other opposition groups, particularly the Islamists. Moreover, the regime portrayed the CCDC's figures as being *wataniyyun* ('patriotic'), and *shurafa'* ('honest'), and stressed that most of them were based in Syria, unlike the members of other opposition factions, many of whom were in exile. In effect, this widened the gap between internal and external opposition cliques.

However, viewed in this light, the CCDC did not represent a monolithic unit. Instead, it suffered from fragmentation, which provoked many of its members to defect from it only a few months after its creation. Two cases in point are Michel Kilo and Burhan Ghalioun.<sup>265</sup> In parallel, the widening gap between the CCDC's leadership and its youth members seemed to reduce its power, since although the CCDC mobilised an array of *shabab al-thawra* ('the revolutionary youth') under its umbrella, it could not form an effective communication channels with them. In this light, the CCDC had attempted to craft a social contract with the secular, educated youth of the urban and rural middle-classes (most of them aged between 23 and 33 year-old) who, though they inhabit Damascus, they originally come from rural areas. Notably, they also belong to different sectarian backgrounds coming from sects as diverse as Sunnis, Alawites, Ismailis and Christians.<sup>266</sup> Nevertheless, the numbers of the CCDC's youth members was relatively small compared with that of other opposition groups.<sup>267</sup> In addition, coordination and cooperation between the CCDC's leadership and some of its members among the new guard seemed to be insufficient, as most of the revolutionary activities were being undertaken without the supervision of the old guard. For

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<sup>264</sup> Carsten Wieland *op.cit.*, p.190

<sup>265</sup> Ibid

<sup>266</sup> Fieldwork Syria February-October 2012.

<sup>267</sup> Author's interview with an anonymous anti-Assad politician, 4/5/ 2012 in Damascus.

instance, according to a CCDC member, the leadership is not involved in revolutionary activities on the ground – such as the designing of flyers and banners – that aimed to foster national unity, and to promote the CCDC’s logic. Instead, these procedures were conducted individually by *shabab al-thawra*, who rarely had the opportunity to discuss their working strategy with their mentors. In fact, many of the CCDC’s youth members interviewed by the author claimed that their leaders did not establish effective communication channels with them, and went on to accuse the old guard of “lacking the appropriate vision of how to apply their logic on the battlefield”.<sup>268</sup> Thereafter, many of the new guard decided to defect from the CCDC. Tammam, a 28 year-old former CCDC member hailing from Msyaf in western Hama and working in Damascus, encapsulates the new guard perspective on the CCDC:

“I totally agree with the CCDC’s logic. Its leadership has a deep understanding of Syria’s political realm, but their rhetoric towards us [the new guard] and towards the revolution stems from the old school. Shortly after its creation, the CCDC became a paralysed political organisation that only issues press releases, rather than a revolutionary coalition that engages in the uprising. It was incapable of formulating strategies that suited the revolution and the new circumstances it imposed. Moreover, its leadership is divided and its figures are fighting for power. And most importantly, they are seeking to ride the revolution, as it provided them with what they have been pursuing for decades”.<sup>269</sup>

Against this backdrop, it seems that the CCDC has not established the necessary material structures which, as according to inside sources, the CCDC is self-funded and does not receive funds from external powers, since it is strongly opposed to outside intervention. As a result, its sources and supplies are very limited. Nevertheless it runs a charitable network that provides humanitarian aid to those affected by the uprising, in September 2012, it distributed food baskets in the Qaddam district of Damascus.<sup>270</sup> Additionally, although the CCDC use online media to endorse its rhetoric, this was limited to a Facebook page, and to a website on which press releases and articles written

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<sup>268</sup> Author’s interview with Omar 1/10/2012 in Damascus.

<sup>269</sup> Author’s interview with Tammam 25/3/ 2013 via Skype.

<sup>270</sup> *ibid*

by the old guard were regularly posted. Therefore, the material structures that the CCDC relied on were very limited in comparison with those of other players.

### 1.1.2. *tayar bina'a al-dawla al-Souriyya 'Building the Syrian State Current';*

Soon after defecting from the CCDC, a former communist called Louay Hussein co-founded the Building the Syrian State Current (BSSC). This is a political movement that brought together secular Syrians from various ideological and sectarian backgrounds. Though it is based and operates mainly in Damascus, it has a few representatives in Aleppo and other cities. Hussein, an Alawite by birth, is a well-established figure in the old guard, and spent nine years in custody during the Hafiz Assad era. Like the CCDC, the BSSC opposed the use of violence and external involvement in the uprising, and stood against myriad opposition cliques, especially the Islamists. Furthermore, the BSSC depicted Islamist militias as “terrorist groups”<sup>271</sup>, a term that is frequently used by the Assad regime in reference to the rebels. In essence, the BSSC’s primary objective consisted of building a democratic state that would guarantee the “principle of citizenship and equality for all Syrian citizens regardless of their ethnic and religious affiliations”.<sup>272</sup> In fact, it sought to boost *al-wihda al-wataniyya* (‘national unity’) and to create *dawla madaniyya* (‘a civic state’) discarding any models of theocracy or federalization. However, as observers have argued, the BSSC lacked any practical or clear strategies with which to achieve these goals.<sup>273</sup> Moreover, for many anti-Assad Syrians, the BSSC did not represent a legitimate player, since the rhetoric it used to denounce Islamists, armed struggle and western intervention was equivalent to that of the Syrian regime. Besides, although Hussein was captured for a very short period during the early

<sup>271</sup> “bayan hawl khitab al-ra’ys”, (‘Statement concerning the President’s speech’), BSSC website, accessed on 14/3/2013, available at <http://binaa-syria.com/B/ar/content/>

<sup>272</sup> “ta’ryf mukhtasar bi al-tayar” (‘the Current in brief’), BSSC website, accessed on 8/10/2013, available at <http://binaa-syria.com/B/ar/content/%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%81-%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1-1>

<sup>273</sup> Author’s interview with an anonymous opposition figure, 15/1/2013, Skype.

days of the uprising, soon after his release the Syrian regime began to turn a blind eye to the BSSC's political activities. This raised suspicions that the BSSC had allied itself with the Assad regime. For example, Hussein was allowed to give statements to the media and to conduct meetings in the heart of Damascus. In September 2012, he met the UN/Arab League especial representative for Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, at the Dedeman hotel in Damascus, from where he gave anti-regime statements to the Syrian State media.<sup>274</sup> Accordingly, the BSSC's position deteriorated, since on the one hand the Current lost credibility as an opposition platform, and on the other hand the divisions between the BSSC and other factions of the opposition were widening. A good indicator of this deterioration is the failure of the so-called Semiramis conference, which was orchestrated in Damascus in June 2011 by Hussein himself and by some notable members of the CCDC. Unprecedentedly, under the theme of 'Syria is for all; in the shadow of a democratic civil state', some two hundred anti-regime intellectuals met openly in the heart of the Syrian capital, in an effort to advance Syrianist sentiment and to propose a political solution for transforming the country into a democratic state.<sup>275</sup> However, the conference proved to be fruitless, and it mirrored the fragmentation of the Syrian opposition, since many factions boycotted and denounced the conference. Most importantly, the conference was strongly opposed by the youth movements. In this vein, the BSSC sought to endear itself to the new guard in an attempt to construct a supportive base that would bolster its power. In fact, like the CCDC, the BSSC managed to forge a social contract with the secular youth of Damascus, who belonged to various identity groups and who were residing in Damascus despite hailing from other cities and towns. These, intellectual youth (largely aged between 23 and 33 years old) advocated the use of peaceful means in overthrowing the autocracy and dismissed the militarisation of the uprising. Consequently, their revolutionary activities were limited to protests, sit-ins and the organisation of online campaigns. However, the BSSC's new guard represented an extremely small clique that functioned mainly in the capital. For instance, Ali, a 27-year old anti-Assad activist, stresses that although he agrees with the BSSC's use of rhetoric to promote Syrian national identity and to reject military intervention. He refused to be one of its members:

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<sup>274</sup> "UN envoy says conflict is global threat", Reuters Website, accessed on 8/10/2013, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/15/us-syria-crisis-assad-idUSBRE88E03U20120915>

<sup>275</sup> "mu'tamar sameramis fi dimashq" ('Semermis conference in Damascus'), Sooryoon website, accessed on 8/10/2013, available at <http://www.sooryoon.net/archives/27267>

“We [the revolutionary youth] do not want to be polarised. The BSSC tried many times to hijack events that we organised. In March 19, 2012, we launched a charitable campaign dubbed ‘Homs is in our hearts’. The campaign’s supreme goal was to show solidarity with those Syrians stuck amidst the violence in Homs. Yet the BSSC, via its website, claimed that it was the political body that had sponsored ‘Homs in our hearts’. It was us not them who organised it, and who later got arrested because of it”.<sup>276</sup> Ali is a civil activist who, with around 35 other young people, co-founded *shu fiy al-youm* (‘what is happening today?’). This represented a small group of educated, secular, young people youth (aged between 19 and 28) from the urban middle-classes who belonged to different identity group, (Ali himself is a Shiite). This group aimed to promote Syrian unity via peaceful revolutionary activities, such as undertaking aid campaigns and organising protests, yet its fieldwork was restricted to urban areas, mainly in Damascus. In this context, the BSSC could not establish charitable networks, as it is self-funded and therefore lacked the necessary resources. Thus, its usage of the material structures was limited to social media (mainly Facebook and YouTube), through which the Current promote for its ideology.<sup>277</sup>

## **1.2. The new guard of the Syrian secular opposition; an emerging player in the Syrian drama?**

As has been discussed earlier in this chapter, the Syrian uprising witnessed the rise of a new secular actor in the political theater, an actor that has been marginalised as long as the secular opposition platform has been manipulated by the old guard. As chapter two explains, although the old guard has a historical record of political struggle against authoritarianism, they nevertheless failed to effect any change. Inspired by their revolutionary counterparts in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen, Syria’s secular youth seems to represent a top-down actor who is vying to secure a foothold in the Syrian drama. Therefore, the growth of anti-Assad youth movements mushroomed, each group struggling to resist attempts to steer the uprising in a sectarian direction, while also seeking to reconstruct a Syrian national identity. The following section focuses on two youth movements that were extremely active during the first two years of the uprising. Also, this section sheds light on

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<sup>276</sup> Author’s interview with Ali al-Zain 8/3/2013 via Skype.

<sup>277</sup> Fieldwork in Damascus, February to October 2012.

the use of communication channels created by the new guard in their efforts to construct a Syrian national identity.

### 1.2.1 *Tsunami al-hurriyya*, the ‘Tsunami of Freedom movement’:

This movement was co-founded in Damascus in May 2011. It is a civil movement whose principally aim is to reproduce a Syrian national identity in which the individual’s association with the Syrian state is the dominant. According to its founder, Oula Ramadan (an Alawite by birth), the axial goal of this movement is to “induce the unity of Syrian people in order to overthrow the Assad-regime and to build a democratic state, a state of citizenship”.<sup>278</sup> The social demographic to which the members of *tsunamiy al-hurriya* belong is the well-educated, middle-class stratum of young people (roughly aged between 22 and 32), who belong to various identity groups. Although they reside in the Syrian capital, they are not originally Damascenes. Furthermore, some of them are secular, while others are atheists. Practically speaking, these young people represent the bedrock of the peaceful struggle against the Assad regime, as they conducted self-funded, peaceful activities, such as organising protests and sit-ins, producing documentaries and distributing flyers that employed materialistic and symbolic elements in an effort to generate a sense of Syrianism in the populace. For example, one of the flyers that *tsunamiy al-hurriyya* distributed in Damascus in July 2011, says; *ana w Mohamed w Elias w Ali rbynna sawa* (‘me, Mohamed, Elias and Ali have grown up together’). This is a cross sectarian slogan, as the names refer to various identity groups: Ali for Alawites or Shiites, Elias for Christians, and Mohamed for Sunnis. This propaganda was part of the first campaign launched by *tsunamiy al-hurriyya* in July 2011. The campaign’s theme recalled the primary goal of the Syrian uprising; ‘the people want to overthrow the regime’. Moreover, its logo underscored the *sine qua non* of the movement, as it displayed the Syrian map with writing in the middle that reads *minhibik* (‘we love you’). Reportedly, flyers and stickers for this campaign spread throughout Damascus. According to Ramadan, the campaign was a straightforward endeavor “to stress that love and loyalty should be for *al-watan* (‘motherland’) and not for an individual, a religion or a sect”.<sup>279</sup> As has been observed by the author, the working

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<sup>278</sup> Author’s interview with Oula Ramadan, 3/1/2013 in Beirut.

<sup>279</sup> *ibid.*

field of *tsunamiy al-hurriyya* was limited to the capital, where on some occasions the group cooperated with other factions of youth movements. One such faction was the Local Coordination Committees of the Revolution (LCC) operating in midan and in kafrsuseh which, as has been argued in chapter three, were associated with Sufis. Therefore, there were many incidents in which disagreements over secular discourse (such as slogans, banners and flyers) surfaced between both youth movements.<sup>280</sup>

Essentially, *tsunamiy al-hurriyya* did not receive support from any state or non-state actors. However some factions of the old guard, such as the BSSC strove to mobilise the youth of this movement. Nevertheless, members of *tsunamiy el-hurriyya* continuously refuted such attempts at polarisation because, as Ramadan notes, the power of the movement rested on its apolitical, revolutionary youth image. And therefore, the movement “stood against attempts by the old guard to ride *shabab al-thawra*”.<sup>281</sup> Importantly, by September 2012, several members of *tsunami al-hurriyya* had fled Syria, due to suppression by the Assad regime, and took refuge either in neighbouring countries (namely, Lebanon and Jordan) or in Europe (particularly in Paris and Germany). From these locations they generally resumed their quest to advance a national identity. This time, however, they attempted to achieve their objective via the online community, rather than acting on the ground. This reduced the power of the movement and diminished its foothold over other players.

### 1.2.2 *Tajamu’a nabad li al-shabab al-madaniy al-souriyy ‘Pulse Gathering for Syrian Civil Youth’;*

*Nabad* is among the first and the largest civil youth movements that were created in the third month of the uprising with the aim of “mobilising youths who seek the establishment of a civil state [...] and advocating the peaceful transfer for power”.<sup>282</sup> Its core objective is to “strengthen Syrian unity and to transform Syria into a plural state”.<sup>283</sup> Referring to its manifesto, the key principles that underpin *nabad*’s rhetoric are the advancement of democracy, pluralism and citizenship rights, by

<sup>280</sup> Fieldwork in Damascus, February- October 2012.

<sup>281</sup> Author’s interview with Oula Ramadan, 3/1/2013, Beirut.

<sup>282</sup> See *nabad*’s manifesto posted on its Facebook page, accessed on 14-3-2013 ,available at <https://www.facebook.com/#!/nabd.shabab.syria?fref=ts>

<sup>283</sup> Ibid

which “sectarian affiliations could be transcended”.<sup>284</sup> Insider sources in *nabed* claim that it has dozens of hundreds of members working across Syria in cities like Damascus, Deir al-Zour, Homs, Aleppo, Hama, Qamishli and even in their suburbs.<sup>285</sup> Indeed, *nabed* asserted itself as an active player on the ground and succeeded in lobbying secular youth followers of various identity groups, such as Sunnis, Alawites, Christians, Ismailis, Kurds and Druze. *Nabed’s* members can be categorised as belonging to the apolitical, well-educated youth of the urban middle-classes, though some of them come from the lower-classes of the rural areas, who moved to the city for study. *Nabed* sought to deliver its message via revolutionary procedures, such as by organising demonstrations and campaigns. Moreover, members of *nabed* often took part at revolutionary activities launched by Islamist opposition groups (for example, they participated in protests dominated by Islamists while displaying banners rejecting sectarianism) in an attempt to “let [the secular] voice be heard”.<sup>286</sup> One case in point is a banner that was displayed by a *nabed* follower during a protest in Raqa city that was organised by militant Islamists in March 2013. The writing in the banner reads: “Syria is a country for all, no exclusion, no exception”<sup>287</sup>. In this context, *nabed* depended on symbols (such as the evocation of Syrian history), and material structures for promoting Syrian national identity. Additionally, like other opposition actors, it utilised online media to endorse its logic, and hence it created a Facebook page (which has some 13,600 followers) in which it uploaded videos and pictures of its revolutionary activities.<sup>288</sup> Also, *nabed* ran a low-scale charity network that provided humanitarian aid to those affected by the uprising such as by delivering food-baskets to families who fled their homes due to bombardments. However, according to a senior member at *nabed*, this charitable work was “inadequate as *nabed* lacked the funding sources”.<sup>289</sup> It is worth mentioning that during the uprising, many youth associated with *nabed* were punished by the regime, and hence they either suspended their membership or opted to flee the country. Consequently, this handicapped the movement and limited its capability to gathering momentum.

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid

<sup>285</sup> Author’s interview with Lama 1/6/2012, Damascus.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid

<sup>287</sup> See picture of this banner posted on *nabed’s* page on Facebook, accessed on 8/10/2013, available at <https://www.facebook.com/#!/photo.php?fbid=493381527388304&set=pb.177009252358868.-2207520000.1365936732&type=3&theater> accessed on 8/10/2013

<sup>288</sup> See the *nabed* Page on Facebook *op.cit.*

<sup>289</sup> Author’s interview with Rand 8/1/2013 in Beirut.



### 1.2.3. *The axial tool in the hands of the new guard:*<sup>290</sup>

As they belong to the age of globalisation and information technology, the new guard utilised new forms of media to strike a unifying chord amongst Syrians, and to reduce any logistic hindrances to their activities. They successfully established communication channels to endorse their logic, one notable example of which is *Souriali* or ‘Syrianist’, a radio station created in October 2012 in Beirut, Lebanon, where its staff are mostly based. However, it has few correspondents operating inside Syria. It aired its programs online as well as uploading its programs onto social media websites. In essence, *Souriali* strove to advance a sense of Syrian national unity, and to identify itself with all Syrians, regardless of their political and religious affiliations. Its philosophy is that: “*Souriali* serves as a platform for Syrians to talk about Syria, without borders and without limits”.<sup>291</sup> Fundamentally, *Souriali*’s programs were designed to evoke Syrian history, symbols and folklore in an attempt to reproduce a national identity. For example, it continues to broadcast a sixty-minute weekly program entitled ‘*ayam al-lulu* (‘days of pearls’), which recalls aspects of Syrian history during the 1970s, 80s and 90s of the last century. It also airs a weekly program, dubbed *hakawaty souriyya* (‘Syrian storyteller’) which uses a sarcastic tone to denounce the division between Syrians of various ethnicities.<sup>292</sup> Reportedly, young people from the urban middle-classes form the backbone of the *Souriali* staff, who are educated and are highly skilled in using information technology. However, most of them left Syria shortly after the onset of the uprising.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> This section is to be published in Rifai, Ola “The Role of Media in the Syrian Conflict: Exploring the conflict” *Wiley-Blackwell journal Asian Politics & Policy* (forthcoming July 2014)

<sup>291</sup> See *Souriali*’s website, accessed on 8/10/2013, available at <http://souriali.com/> . All of *Souriali*’s programs are archived on this website. *Souriali* has some 83,400 listeners (as stated on its Facebook).

<sup>292</sup> “*ayam al-lulu*” (‘days of pearls’), *Souriali* Website, accessed on 19/4/2013, available at <http://souriali.com/cms/?p=90>

<sup>293</sup> Author’s Interview with an anonymous *Souriali* member of staff, 17/4/2013, Skype.

A second case in point is *Souriatna* or ('our Syria'). This is a weekly magazine established in September 2011 by a group of middle-class Damascenes (aged between 20 to 27 year-old), who were based in Damascus, some of whom subsequently went into exile, particularly, in Lebanon.<sup>294</sup> As the name indicates, *Souriatna* strove to foster Syrian nationalism and to "underlines that Syria is the home for all Syrians, rejecting the logic of radicalization and discrimination"<sup>295</sup>. In issues of sixteen pages each, *Souriatna* publishes reports, comics, interviews and articles that expounds principles of democracy and citizenship, and that recall Syria's history. For instance, it includes a column entitled *wjuoh min wataniyy* ('faces from my motherland') devoted to recalling Syrian national figures from the previous century. Arguably, *Souriatna* had a limited number of readers, as its print issues were only distributed in the capital, and were distributed throughout a tight circle of Syrian activists. However, high quality editions of these issues were accessible on an online blog and also on *Souriatna*'s Facebook page.

The final example of these communication channels is a website called *dawlaty* ('my state'), which was created in January 2013 by secular activists who aimed to promote Syrianism, and to emphasise the crucial role of the reconciliation in rebuilding post-Assad Syria. According to its founding statement, *dawlaty*'s foremost mission is to:

"Seek to enact Syria's transition to a state of citizenship, to eliminate the tendency for revenge, to boost the peaceful struggle, and to increase the dialogue between all different factions of civil society".<sup>296</sup>

In essence, *dawlaty*'s strategies for fulfilling these goals were centered on the use of visual images to raise awareness and to indoctrinate Syrians with Syrianist sentiment. Hence, the website published videos and graffiti that highlighted the importance of unity between Syrians, and which denounced sectarian discourse. Although most of *dawlaty*'s staff were based in exile, few of its members continued to work inside Syria. Also, *dawlaty*'s staff inside and outside Syria tended to cooperate with *nabed* and other movements of the new guard. One example of *dawlaty*'s graffiti

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<sup>294</sup> Author's interview with Salim 25/2/ 2012 in Damascus.

<sup>295</sup> See *Souriatna*'s manifesto on *Souriatna*'s Facebook page, accessed on 31/10/2013, available at <https://www.facebook.com/souriatna>. Also, all the issues of *Souriatna* are available at <http://issuu.com/souriatna/docs>. Accessed on 8/10/2013.

<sup>296</sup> "man nahnu" ('who we are'), *dawlaty* website, accessed on 19/4/2013, available at <http://www.dawlaty.org/>

is: “Syria is free and civil”,<sup>297</sup> a slogan that was displayed in March 2013 in al-Raqa. Two other examples of graffiti were presented in the Attareb suburb of Aleppo, which summarise *dawlaty*’s main objective. They read: “Syria is for all, for me and for you”,<sup>298</sup> and “Syria is a mother to all its sons”.<sup>299</sup> In addition, *dawlaty* produced videos that stressed its goal of including the various identity groups. Notably, some of these videos recalled Syria’s history and promoted the importance of civil rights. For instance, in a four-minute video, *dawlaty* presented the constitutions that Syria adopted since 1920.<sup>300</sup> Other videos emphasised the importance of tolerance and citizenship rights.<sup>301</sup>

## Conclusion

Regardless of their vulnerability and varying degree of power they hold, secular political entrepreneurs from the old guard and the new guard play important roles in reconstructing Syrian national identity by using a top-down approach. Indeed, all these case studies discussed in this chapter provide the bases for the analysis of the utilisation of material structures (such as media and charitable networks) and symbolic elements (such as the emphasising of national terminology) in striving to reproduce national identity. However, the insecurity crisis interferes with these actors and factors and hinders the quest to create a Syrian national identity.

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<sup>297</sup>“Syria is civil and free”, *dawlaty* website, accessed on 19/4/2013, available at <https://dawlaty.org/node/3291>. Also see appendix 15.

<sup>298</sup> “Syria is for me, for you and for all”, *dawlaty* website, accessed on 19/4/2013, available at <https://dawlaty.org/node/2617>. Also see appendix 16.

<sup>299</sup>“Syria is a mother for all its children” *dawlaty* website, accessed on 8/10/2013, available at <https://dawlaty.org/node/2619>. Also see appendix 17.

<sup>300</sup> “Constitutions throughout Syrian history”, *dawlaty* website, accessed on 8/10/2013, available at <http://www.dawlaty.org/videos/dstyr-swry-br-ltrykh>

<sup>301</sup> “civil state” *Dawlaty* website, accessed on 8/10/2013, available <http://www.dawlaty.org/videos/ldwl-lmdny-civil-state>

## 2. The bottom-up approach; reconstructing Syrianism from below?:

Slogans like ‘Syrian people are one’<sup>302</sup> and ‘Syrians represent one hand’, were chanted during the first anti-Assad protest in March 15<sup>th</sup> 2011 in Damascus, and were widely repeated during the early months of the uprising. These slogans bolstered Syrianist sentiment and promotes a national identity that included the divergent identity groups. Although about twenty-four months after the uprising, the popularity of such slogans decreased, as a result of vehement ethnic polarisation. Nevertheless, myriad slogans and songs that promoted national unity were still in effect at the grassroots level. Examples of such slogans are: ‘[it is] a revolution against the Ba’athists by Sunnis, Shiites and Alawites’, ‘[we are] Sunnis and Alawites, and we want a civil state’, ‘Syria needs freedom, for Muslims, Christian, Druze and for Alawites’. A final example addressed the Alawites directly, saying; ‘Oh you Alawite, do not hesitate, we are your family and not Bashar [Assad]’.<sup>303</sup> These slogans were voiced during anti-Assad protests in cities like Damascus, Homs and Aleppo, and also in lesser towns like Yabroud of Damascus and Kafrnubl of Idlib. Importantly, in many cases, these slogans incited confrontation between radical and liberal protesters. A good indicator of this, is the clashes that took place during a protest on February 8<sup>th</sup> 2013 in Sarqib province, southern Idlib, where dozens of secular youth, (some of them were affiliated with *nabed*), chanted ‘unity, freedom, civil state’ while waving the revolutionary flag. This provoked fundamentalists to punish those civil youths, and to chant loudly: ‘we want an Islamic Caliphate’ while waving a Salafi-Jihadi flag.<sup>304</sup> Certainly, such incidents reflected the on ongoing identity clashes, while at the same time embodying the attempts to reproduce Syrian national identity at the grassroots level

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<sup>302</sup> See appendix 18.

<sup>303</sup> Fieldwork in Damascus, February- October 2012, also see appendix.

<sup>304</sup> Author’s interview with an anonymous activist in Saraqib, 19/2/2013 via Skype. Also, see the video of this protest uploaded on YouTube by rebels. “’anasir katayb Islamiyya taqum bi tamzyq ‘lam al-thawra” (‘members of Islamist militias are ripping the revolutionary flag’), YouTube, accessed on 8/10/2013, available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=R\\_1xdQX33pM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=R_1xdQX33pM)

and to emphasise the role of symbols in the war of identities. Furthermore, it denotes the social interaction between the top-down and the bottom-up approaches, which seem to subject identity to an enduring process of reproduction.

Viewed in this light, songs that projected national sentiment came to occupy a key place in anti-Assad protests, and were also broadly distributed throughout the online community. In essence, these songs emphasised nationalist phraseology, such as ‘motherland’, ‘Syria’, and ‘Syrian people’. An extremely popular song that was repeated throughout the first two years of the uprising condemns sectarian divisions among the Syrians. This song was entitled: ‘and I am going to protest while carrying my blood in my hands’. This song was created in May 2011 by protesters in the *dūr-b’alba* suburb of Homs, -which (as chapter two discussed) was a hotbed for the occurrence of sectarian incidents, as it borders Alawite districts-. An extract of the song runs as follows:

“And I’m going to protest while I’m carrying my blood in my hands, oh mother do not cry if I come back to you as a martyr. These youths have heard about the Syrian revolution and started to chant for freedom. Oh Bashar [Assad] we are neither terrorists nor Salafis. We are the sons of this county, [we are] the sons of you, Syria. The crisis won’t divide us, [we are] Sunnis and Alawites”.<sup>305</sup>

Another example of a song that stressed the importance of national unity is entitled: ‘will build Syria, a civil state’. It signifies the quest to reproduce a civic national identity and to develop harmony amongst Syrians. Interestingly, the song was created on March 2013, by civil youths in Aleppo aiming to counter an earlier version of a Salafi-Jihadi song (*Shurta Nusairiyya*, mentioned in section 2 of chapter 3) that threatened to slaughter the Alawites. The new version of the song mimics the melody of the old version but alters its lyrics radically. A brief extract of it says:

“We will build Syria, a civil state. The Syrian people revolted because they want freedom. Justice is our demand, neither hatred nor revenge. Despite the pain and the blood, we will remain brothers and Syria will gather us. Syria is about its colours, it is rich because of you and because of us. [So]

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<sup>305</sup> Fieldwork Syria February-October 2012. An online version of this song is available on YouTube. See “w ana tali’ ‘tzahr w damaty bi ‘aydayh”, (‘and I am going to protest and I carry my blood in my hands’), YouTube, accessed on 8/10/2013, available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-QI\\_Pthy60...](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-QI_Pthy60...)

do not allow the test of the blood to blind your belief’<sup>306</sup> This song was extensively distributed throughout the online realm, and was sung in a few protests in Damascus and Aleppo. However, by March 2013, the number of anti-Assad protests had shrunk due to the escalation of violence.

In the same context, in December 2011 (when sectarian clashes were inflamed in Homs, due to polarisation and kidnapping incidents), a group of secular youths created an apolitical song that denounced sectarianism and called for tolerance among Syrians:

“I want to tell a story about love and hope, a story about my country and its dreadful pain. I do not understand politics, but I’m following the news, regardless of everything that has happened, in Syria we are all brothers. I’m going to Homs within the next two days [...]. I’m going to see my brothers; the loyalist, the opponent, the protester and the security officer [...] the radical and the secular [...]. I’m going to meet the big family whose children grew up together [...]. I will go to my school in Bab-Siba’a, in which I learned that each girl is my sister and each boy is my brother, in which religious classes [we used to have as students] in the previous years could not convince us that we are different [...]. This is the story of my family that needs a minute of quiet to listen to its heart which beats the same blood. I’m going to Homs castle to write graffiti that says ‘we are one people, a united nation and we will cut off the hand that played with sectarianism’ [...].”<sup>307</sup> Although the song was not commonly sung in protests on account of its length and slow melody, it was posted widely online and was acknowledged by a wide range of Syrians, even those loyal to Assad.

A final example is a song entitled ‘the lily vendor’, which reinforced the concept of Syrian nationalism. The lyrics of this song were written by Adnan al-Awda, a civil activist based in Damascus. In March 2013, this song spread throughout the online community, and received over 63,400 view on YouTube. Most importantly, it was appreciated by various groups of Syrians, both rebels and pro-Assad Syrians. A brief extract of the song runs:

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<sup>306</sup> For an online version of this song see “shurta nusairiyya, al-niskha al-halabiyya” , (‘Nusairiyya policemen, the Aleppo version’), YouTube, accessed on 15/4/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxXHvkkoZgM>

<sup>307</sup> For an online version of this song see “nazil ‘ala homs” (‘[ I’m] going to Homs’), YouTube, accessed on 8/10/2013, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3dcHE4SjO4>

“The lily vendor in al-mayissat square (a central square in Damascus), has sold five bouquets [...]. One was for the widow of a martyr and one was for a mother [...]. The last one was for a killer, who wanted to hide the blood of [his] victim before it would drip [...]. The lily vendor sold all the bouquets and [then she] went back to the plantation to get [more] seeds, [We are all] Syrians”.<sup>308</sup>

Indeed, such national symbols, songs, and slogans indicate that a sense of Syrianism is functioning on a bottom-up approach, and is interacting with those discourses directed from above. This interaction seems to position Syrian national identity on an enduring process of reproduction.

## Conclusion

Amidst the war of identities that exploded during the uprising, Syrian national identity was reproduced from above and from below. The secular old guard and the new guard constitute the key political entrepreneurs, who strove to generate a sense of Syrian nationalism and to induce a civic national identity in which the individual's affiliation with the Syrian state would be the dominant layer. Both of these actors employed material structures (mainly, the media) and also symbolic features (such as the evocation of Syria's history) to reproduce a national identity that would assert their power over other actors. However, myriad vulnerabilities imposed limitations on their chances to do so in the short-term. On the one hand, the old guard represented a deeply fragmented actor who lacked legitimacy, clear programs and objectives, social base, and most importantly, powerful material resources. Although they had a long record of political struggle against the Assad regime, the old guard could not develop appropriate strategies that would meet the public demands, and suit the new context created by the *Arab Spring*. In addition, the old guard could not bridge the generation gap between themselves and the new guard, and hence they were unable to attract a vital component in the uprising. These intellectual secularists also failed to enlist the support of the pious Syrians of rural areas. More importantly, they were subjected to the regime's divide-and- rule politics, which transformed them in the popular imagination from being an old enemy of the regime, to a trustful actor that the regime would be ready to negotiate with.

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<sup>308</sup> For an online version of this song see “baya’it al-zanbq” (‘The lily’s vendor’), YouTube, accessed on 13/3/2013, available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=gYhkjfYvw2Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=gYhkjfYvw2Q).

This, destroyed the legitimacy and credibility that they had hitherto enjoyed as an anti-regime bloc. On the other hand, the new guard who were born during the eighties and early nineties, adhered to Syrian nationalism and associated themselves less with the ideology of Arabism than their parents' generation.<sup>309</sup> Moreover, as secularists, they veered away from Islamic fundamentalism. Therefore, they established themselves collectively as a political player who sought to unite the Syrians in a cohesive sense of national identity. Chiefly, these young people represented the bedrock of the peaceful mass movements, and were extremely active on the ground. Unlike the old guard this yielded them credibility in the eyes of many Syrians. However, the new guard seemed to have been trapped between the continuous repression of the regime and the challenges put to them by fundamentalists, which provoked them to flee the country, and handicapped their agenda. Beside this, like the old guard, they lacked sufficient material sources for advancing their aims. Although they succeeded in utilising material structures, one could nevertheless argue that such materials were not accessible to a large category of Syrians, in that only those who had internet access could listen to radio stations, and only those who were educated could read their bulletins. Hence, the efficiency of their communication tools was restricted. In this respect, the secular ideology adopted by both of the old guard and the new guard created a division between themselves and the devout lower-classes from the rural areas, a class that inclines itself more readily towards radicalisation. Therefore, the attempts of both the old guard and the new guard to reproduce Syrian national identity was limited to a particular class of Syrians, namely, the educated, urban middle-classes of secular beliefs. Nonetheless, the new guard proved themselves capable to a relative extent of bridging these gaps, owing to the fact that, many of the new guard originally came from rural areas. With the onset of the uprising they returned to their towns and villages, from where they established networks that strove to advance Syrian nationalism and to counter the unfolding sectarian discourse. More importantly, these networks developed links between rural and urban areas. However, the obstacles presented by the regime's campaign of suppression, the predominance of the fundamentalists in the rural areas, and the general lack of funds served to thwart any chances of real progress. Overlapping these attempts by the old guard and the new guard to reproduce national identity from above, is the discourse that was projected

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<sup>309</sup> The new guard mainly stressed the individual's association with the territorial Syrian state (for example, by frequently displaying the Syrian map), and sought to impress upon Syrians that they were citizens of a Syrian nation by evoking Syrian history and culture. However, this is not to say that the new guard devalued the ideology of Arabism, but for them it was Syrianism that should be the hegemonic affiliation.



at the grassroots level, and which embodied a sense of Syrian nationalism. Various cross-sectarian songs and slogans emerged during the uprising, which played a crucial role in reproducing national identity from below, as they sought to craft an inclusive identity for all identity groups.

In summary, the ongoing uprising in Syria subjects the Syrian national identity to a continuous process of reproduction. As this chapter has demonstrated, four variables (political entrepreneurs, material structure, symbolic elements and the *security dilemma*) are the core pillars of this process. Importantly, these variables interact with other from a top-down as well as a bottom-up perspective, and provide ground for including and excluding members of a group. Indeed, a sense of Syrianism appears to being projected from below and interacts with discourses of secular actors projected from above. In turn, these actors manipulate material structures and symbolic elements in order to craft a national identity that bolsters the individual's affiliation with the Syrian state and transcends sectarian belongings. Nevertheless, these actors have been made vulnerable by the *security dilemma* that underpinned the uprising. In the short-term, this has thwarted their quest to reproduce a Syrian national identity.

## Chapter Six

### Conclusion

This thesis had provided insights into several of the existing debates about identity, nationalism and conflict. The thesis argued that identity was used as an essential weapon with which to construct power among the various identity groups, and it has attempted to demonstrate that a war waged with identities can be as significant and powerful as one waged with bullets. Indeed, the Syrian case reveals that there is no single inevitable identity; several identities can either co-exist or clash. The coexistence or clashing between identities depends on both materialistic and symbolic elements, and is subject to discourse directed from a top-down as well as a bottom-up mobilisation of symbols. The interaction between both levels and between the materialistic and symbolic features alters the balance of identity, either stabilising or destroying it. As has been argued in chapter one of this thesis, identity entails a group of affiliations that an individual has with a place, state religion, tribe or clan. It cannot be limited to one given affiliation, rather, it is composed of myriad layers. None of these layers are capable of completely eroding or effacing one another, however, one given layer may prevail over the others, which alters the identity balance and provokes identity clashes. In essence, the foregoing chapters have attempted to prove that the interaction between materialistic and symbolic elements and between discourses directed from above and those directed from below, subjects identity to a continuous process of reproduction, which triggers identity clashes. This interaction is devalued by modernist who prioritise material conditions, and by ethno-symbolists who prioritise symbolic discourse. Hence, the theoretical model proposed in chapter one emphasises the significance of this interaction in reproducing identity and provoking identity clashes. According to this model, four variables are critical to this process; state and non-state political entrepreneurs, material structure, symbolic elements, and the presence of a *security dilemma*. The interaction between these variables reconstructs the power of a particular identity and subjects it to a continuous process of reproduction.

Fundamentally, the empirical chapters of this thesis attempt to demonstrate that the discourses of various top-down actors; (namely, the Syrian regime, Hezbollah, Iran, the Maliki government,

Qatar, Turkey, the KRG, Sunni political entrepreneurs, Kurdish players and the old and new guard of Syria's secular opposition) aim to reproduce different identities for *realpolitik* gains, and are capable of constructing identity clashes. Although these actors differ in the style in which they project their discourses, some of them project sectarian discourses in an explicit way (such as the Sunni political entrepreneurs who use anti-Alawite language), while the discourses of other actors (like the Syrian regime, Iran and Hezbollah) are implicitly sectarian. Nevertheless, both discourses seem to provoke a sectarian response from listeners, and therefore emphasise the conflicts between the different identity groups from above. The second variable suggested by this thesis to be responsible for reconstructing identities and fueling identity clashes is the material structure. Indeed, the findings of this thesis indicate that material structures and resources (such as arms, media and charitable networks) were manipulated by the various political entrepreneurs, and played a vital role in pitting particular identities against others. The manipulation of these variables played a vital role in inciting identity clashes. Therefore, this thesis supports the claim of modernists that the policies of the elite, when implemented in conjunction with material variables, serve to reconstruct identities. However, this thesis has argued that, in contrast to the modernists' assumptions, the manipulation of material structures is not capable of reproducing identities independently. Rather, this reproduction depends upon another variable: the symbols of each identity group. As ethno-symbolists claim, it is the symbolic elements that motivate communal actions and pit identity groups against each other. In this light, chapters 3, 4 and 5 revealed how slogans, flags, folklore, jokes, language and myths (such as the Zulfiqar sword, the citing from Ibn Taimiyya, the Kurdish language, the Newroz celebration and the Syrian map) signify how an individual is different from the 'other', and emphasise the concept of 'otherness' by visibly excluding or including members of a specific identity group. Thus, these elements play significant roles in reproducing identity and 'renewing the ancient hatred'<sup>310</sup> between identity groups. This consequently serves to provoke the outbreak of identity clashes. Nevertheless, although the elite manipulated symbolic elements by using a top-down approach, chapters 3, 4 and 5 of this thesis argue that symbolic elements also function at the grassroots level and are not subject to the manipulation of the elite. Therefore, the interaction between symbolic and material elements from a bottom-up and top-down perspective -an interaction that is devalued by symbolists and modernists- is crucial to reconstructing identity and inciting identity clashes. However, the

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<sup>310</sup> Kaufman 2001 *op.cit*

empirical chapters of this thesis discuss how, unlike symbols, material resources (such as media, arms, and money) are not equally distributed, and actors with superior material resources (such as the PYD and the NF) have a greater chance of winning the war of identities. Nevertheless, the distribution of material resources might change (for instance, the Sufis or the KNC might secure material structures), which is likely to alter the balance of power between all actors and to redress the balance between identities.

The last variable proposed in the theoretical model is the insecurity crisis, which result from the breakdown of order in civil war. This crisis plays a crucial role in inciting identity clashes between the various identity groups. Since each identity group fears the other's domination, all of them have become locked in a vicious circle of mistrust, and have had to fight for survival. Furthermore, chaos, poverty, violence and propaganda have served to exacerbate this *security dilemma*. Hence, as the analytical model used in this study suggests, the interplay between all these variables: state and non-state political entrepreneurs, material structures, symbolic elements and the *security dilemma*, creates enmity between the different identity groups, which lead to identity clashes. In fact, this interaction between political entrepreneurs, material structure, symbolic elements and the *security dilemma* determines the boundaries between identity groups and subjects the Alawite, Sunni, Kurdish and Syrian national identities to an enduring process of reproduction. In other words, the interplay between the top-down and the bottom up approach (which constitutes the analytical focal point of this study) is capable of including and excluding members of a group, as well as redressing the balance between different identities and inciting clashes. Are any of these identity groups capable of single handedly winning this war by establishing the hegemony of a particular identity? Would a material balance of power and a power sharing between groups pave the way for tolerance of identity diversity? Or will the current identity clashes be suppressed by one materially victorious actor? If none is able to prevail over the other, will the outcome a reconfiguration of territorial borders come to reflect mutual exclusive identity groups? These questions are yet to be answered.

In my last visit to Syria in August and September 2013, the uprising was in its 30<sup>th</sup> month; anarchy was widespread, and violent conflict had extended to the use of chemical weapons. Humanitarian and socio-economic erosion was spreading all over the country. By then, Syria had clearly transformed itself from being a regional player into becoming a battlefield for regional and

international actors. Sectarian hatred and sectarian violence were rapidly increasing with the escalation of the conflict, and this reflected the acceleration of the sectarian discourses projected by various political entrepreneurs. Syria's future looked very bleak.

I managed to ask representatives of each identity group about their motivations for continuing to fight. The question I put to them was: 'what are you fighting for?'. Paradoxically, all of them had the same answer that they were fighting for Syria, for *al-watan* ('the motherland'). However, each of them had his own perspective of *al-watan*, which did not include the 'other'. The Alawite representative, wanted an 'Assad's Syria'. The Sunni representative wanted an Islamist Syria. The Kurdish representative was referring to Kurdistan of Syria. Mohamed, a 23 year-old member of the secular new guard -who had recently been arrested by the Syrian regime-, said: "we are all fighting for Syria. But I'm struggling to find something that would unite all of us".<sup>311</sup> In fact, for as long as they remained within the identity box, Syrians from the various identity groups were trapped on a sinking ship. Here it worth re-calling the words of the Syrian philosopher abu al-'ala' al-ma'arri (d. 1058), who said: *inama hazihi al-mazahib 'assbab li jalb al-dunia 'ila al-rou'as'a* "these sects are only reasons for bringing about life for leaders".<sup>312</sup> It is easy to discern his meaning, which is the leaders thrive on exploiting the sectarian division of the people.

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<sup>311</sup> Author's interview with Mohamed on August 2013. Damascus.

<sup>312</sup> Quoted in "sectarianism and counter-sectarianism", Al-Jazira website accessed on 4/11/2013, available at <http://www.al-jazirah.com/culture/2012/29112012/fadaat27.htm>

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Shikh Kraiyyim rajih: 'ala kul shab yaqul ana souriyy 'n ya'ud l souriyya l yujahed wa yusharek fi al-thawra, ('Sheikh Kra'im Rajih: each guy who refers to himself as Syrian should go back to Syria for Jihad and to take part at the revolution'), accessed on 7/5/2013, available at : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5Oh7kqesc0>

Shurta nusairiyya, al-neskha al-halabiyya, (' Nusairiyya policemen, the Aleppo version'), accessed on 15/4/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxXHvkkoZgM>

Souq al-sunna lel masrouqat, ('Sunni market for looted stuff') , accessed on 14/3/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fp3k1SKff7c>

Souria bi khyr, ('Syria is fine'), accessed on 3/11/2013, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cN4Zn-3RNg> .

Tadrybat wa takhrij duf'ah men abtal lewa' al-islam, ('exercises and graduation of the heroes of al-Islam Brigade'), accessed on 6/10/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPT0rx1CTwA>

Taqryr al-arabiyya ‘an al-madares al-kurdiyya fi souria (‘Al-Arabiya report about Kurdish Schools in Syria’), accessed on 26/4/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nTxmagsf2Q>

Ugarit al-raqa muzzahra fi dawar al-daleh uqba al-tahrir, (‘Ugarit: al-Raq protest at al-delah square after the liberation’), accessed on 11/4/2013, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0otRgG1B55k>

W ana tali’ atzahr w damaty be ‘aydayh, (‘Revolution’s song and I am going to protest and I carry my blood in my hand’), accessed on 8/10/2013, available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-QI\\_Pthy60..](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-QI_Pthy60..)

’Urqusi ya ‘anisa: i’dam al qanasa al-alawiiyyn al-arba’ fi dier wl-zour, (‘Dance you Anysa’ the execution of four Alawite sniper in Deir el Zour’), accessed on 5/5/2013, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGYkxRxhgy4>

Ya Bashar mitalk myn, anta ya ‘aly al-jbyn, (‘Oh Bashar who looks like you, you who have a high forehead’), accessed on 3/11/2013, available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J34\\_VIe8Mzw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J34_VIe8Mzw)

## **Facebook**

Abo al-Fadil al-abbas Brigade page: <https://www.facebook.com/lowa.alabbas.yaali> , accessed on 3/11/2013.



‘Adnan al-ar’our page : <https://www.facebook.com/AdnanAlarour> , accessed on 7/11/2013.

Islam Brigade Page: <https://www.facebook.com/#!/liwaa.Al.Islam.02?fref=ts>, accessed on 4/5/2013.

Million Syrian voice with Nabil al-‘audi, available at <https://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%AE-%D9%86%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%B6%D9%8A/255243627835418?fref=ts>, accessed on 7/11/2013

Nabed’s page: <https://www.facebook.com/#!/nabd.shabab.syria?fref=ts>

Nabed’s banner that says: ‘Syria is a country for all, no exclusion no exception’, posted on nabed’s page on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/#!/photo.php?fbid=493381527388304&set=pb.177009252358868.-2207520000.1365936732&type=3&theater> , accessed on 8/10/2013

Nabed Picture: banner posted on *nabed’s* page on Facebook, accessed on 8/10/2013, available at <https://www.facebook.com/#!/photo.php?fbid=493381527388304&set=pb.177009252358868.-2207520000.1365936732&type=3&theater>

No for the name of Friday’s protest, accessed on 3/11/2013, available at <https://www.facebook.com/naralmjoss>,

PYD page, available at <https://www.facebook.com/#!/groups/381752831836315/?fref=ts> accessed on 7/11/2013.

*Souriatna*'s page available at <https://www.facebook.com/souriatna>, accessed on 7/11/2013.

UKYC's page available at <https://www.facebook.com/Kurdish.youth.union3/info>, accessed on 7/11/2013.

**Twitter:**

'Adnan 'ar'our's official account on Twitter, accessed on 5/11/2013, available at <https://twitter.com/AdnanAlarour>

Zahran 'alloush's official account on Twitter, accessed on 3/11/2013, available at <https://twitter.com/zahran1970>

## Appendices:

### Appendix 1

Ethical approval

25/06/2013

Ola Rifai

International Relations

Ethics Reference No:  <i>Please quote this ref on all correspondence</i>	IR9993
<b>Project Title:</b>	<b>Identities Dilemma in Syria; From Authoritarianism to Revolution</b>
<b>Researchers Name(s):</b>	<b>Ola Rifai</b>
<b>Supervisor(s):</b>	<b>Professor Raymond Hinnebusch</b>

Thank you for submitting your application which was considered at the International Relations School Ethics Committee meeting on the 4/06/2013. The following documents were reviewed:

1. Ethical Application Form

12/03/2013

The University Teaching and Research Ethics Committee (UTREC) approves this study from an ethical point of view. Please note that where approval is given by a School Ethics Committee that committee is part of UTREC and is delegated to act for UTREC.

Approval is given for three years. Projects, which have not commenced within two years of original approval, must be re-submitted to your School Ethics Committee.

You must inform your School Ethics Committee when the research has been completed. If you are unable to complete your research within the 3 three year validation period, you will be required to write to your School Ethics Committee and to UTREC (where approval was given by UTREC) to request an extension or you will need to re-apply.

Any serious adverse events or significant change which occurs in connection with this study and/or which may alter its ethical consideration, must be reported immediately to the School Ethics Committee, and an Ethical Amendment Form submitted where appropriate.

Approval is given on the understanding that the 'Guidelines for Ethical Research Practice' <https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/utrec/guidelines/> are adhered to.

Yours sincerely

Dr. Jeffrey Murer

Convenor of the School Ethics Committee

## Appendix 2

### Chronology

16 May 1916                Sykes Picot agreement by which Syria as a territorial state was created and granted to the French mandate.

17 April 1946             Syria's independence.

October 1962             *Special census* in Kurdish areas.

8 March 1963             Ba'ath military coup.

12 March 1971            Hafiz Assad assumed presidency.

2-28 February 1982      The Syrian regime military campaign against Muslim Brotherhood in Hama.

10 June 2000             Death of Hafez Assad.

21 June 2000             Bashar Assad inherited presidency.

June 2000 - 2001	<i>Damascus Spring.</i>
2002	Elimination of Damascus Spring.
March 2004	Arab/Kurdish clashes in Northeast Syria.
October 2005	Damascus Declaration.
December 2005	Elimination of Damascus Declaration.
December 2010	uprising in Tunisia.
January 2011	uprisings in Egypt and in Yemen.
February 2011	uprising in Libya.
March 2011	uprising in Syria.
April 2011	<i>security solution</i> was employed by the Syrian regime.
April 2011	Grant of citizenship to Kurds in Syria.

July 2011	Creation of Free Syrian Army (FSA).
February 2012	<i>military solution</i> applied by the Syrian regime.
July 2012	Regime troops withdrew from the Kurdish areas in Syria

### Appendix 3

#### Glossary:

BSSC	Building the Syrian State Current.
CCDC	Coordination Committee for Democratic Change.
DD	Damascus Declaration.
FSA	Free Syrian Army.
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party.
KRG	Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq.
NF	Nusra Front.
PCWK	People's Council of Western Kurdistan.
PKK	Kurdistan Worker's party ('Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan' in Kurdish).
KNC	Kurdish National Council.
PYD	Democratic Union Party (' <b>Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat</b> ' in Kurdish).
UKYC	Union of Kurdish Youth Committees in Syria.
YPG	Popular Protection Units ('Yekineyen Parastina Gel' in Kurdish).



## **Appendix 4**

### Note on transliteration:

This thesis followed the transliteration system provided by the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES). It is available online at <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/ijmes/pages/transliteration.html>

## Appendix 5



## Appendix 6

Syrian Qubayssiyyat shop for religious gifts ahead of Prophet Muhammad's birthday, in Damascus, 24/2/ 2010.

Photo by Ola Rifai.





## Appendix 7

A young Syrian girl holds the holy Quran and wears a fake dynamite belt as she acts as a suicide bomber, during an anti-Israeli and anti-American demonstration in Damascus, March 26, 2010.

Photo by Ola Rifai.



## Appendix 8

Anti-Assad protesters chant slogans in front of a mosque in Kafrsuseh area in Damascus, 27/02/2012.

Source: photo by Ola Rifai.



## Appendix 9

Assad troops are besieging a protest that was taking place in a mosque yard in Kafrsuseh area in Damascus, 27/2/2012.

Photo by Ola Rifai.





## Appendix 10

Zulfiqar sword imprinted with picture of Imam Ali. The writing in Arabic reads: ‘there is no guy but Ali, and there is no sword but Zulfiqar’.

Photo by Ola Rifai.



### Appendix 11

A street vendor displays necklaces that symbolise Alawite, Druze and Syrian national identities, in central Damascus, 16/09/2013. From bottom right to left: Picture of Imam Ali, Hassan Nassrallah, Bashar Assad, miniature Zulfiqar Sword, map of Syria in the colours of Syrian flag. From top right to left: Zulfiqar sword with colours of the Syrian flag and imprinted with picture of Bashar Assad, Palestinian map in the colors of the Palestinian flag, and the Druze star (an important symbol of Druze identity group).

Photo by Ola Rifai.





## Appendix 12

Anti-Aassad protesters wave the revolutionanry and the Salafi flags during a protest in the subrubs of Damascus, 26/05/2012.

Photo by Ola Rifai.



### Appendix 13

The profile picture of UKYC's Facebook page. It shows the Syrian map surrounded by the revolutionary flag and the Kurdish flag, while in the middle writing in Arabic and in Kurdish reads: 'Syria is for all Syrians'.

Source: UKYC Facebook Page., *op.,cit.*



### Appendix 14

Hafiz Assad statue (right), the slogan inscribed beneath the picture reads: ‘Syrian production’, statue of Saddam Hussein (left), the slogan inscribed beneath the picture reads: ‘American production’.

Source: “Hafiz statue in Raqa” Al-Mundassa al Souriyya, accessed on 6/11/2013, available at: <http://the-syrian.com/archives/tag/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A9>



صناعة أميركية



صناعة سورية

### Appendix 15

A graffiti by dawlaty that was presented in al-Raqa. It reads: 'Syria is civil and free'.

Source: "Syria is civil and free", dawlaty website, accessed on 19/4/2013, available at <https://dawlaty.org/node/3291>.





## Appendix 16

A graffiti by dawlaty that was presented in the Attareb suburb of Aleppo, it reads: ‘Syria is for me, for you and for all’.

Source: “Syria is for me, for you and for all”, dawlaty website, accessed on 19/4/2013, available at <https://dawlaty.org/node/2617>.



### Appendix 17

A graffiti by dawlaty that was presented in the Attareb suburb of Aleppo, it reads: ‘Syria is a mother for all its children’.

Source: “Syria is a mother for all its children”, dawlaty website, accessed on 8/10/2013, available at <https://dawlaty.org/node/2619> .



### Appendix 18

An anti-Assad activist of the new guard is spraying a wall with Arabic graffiti that reads: 'the Syrian people are on', 30/4/2012, in Kafrsuseh area in Damascus.

Source: by Ola Rifai.

